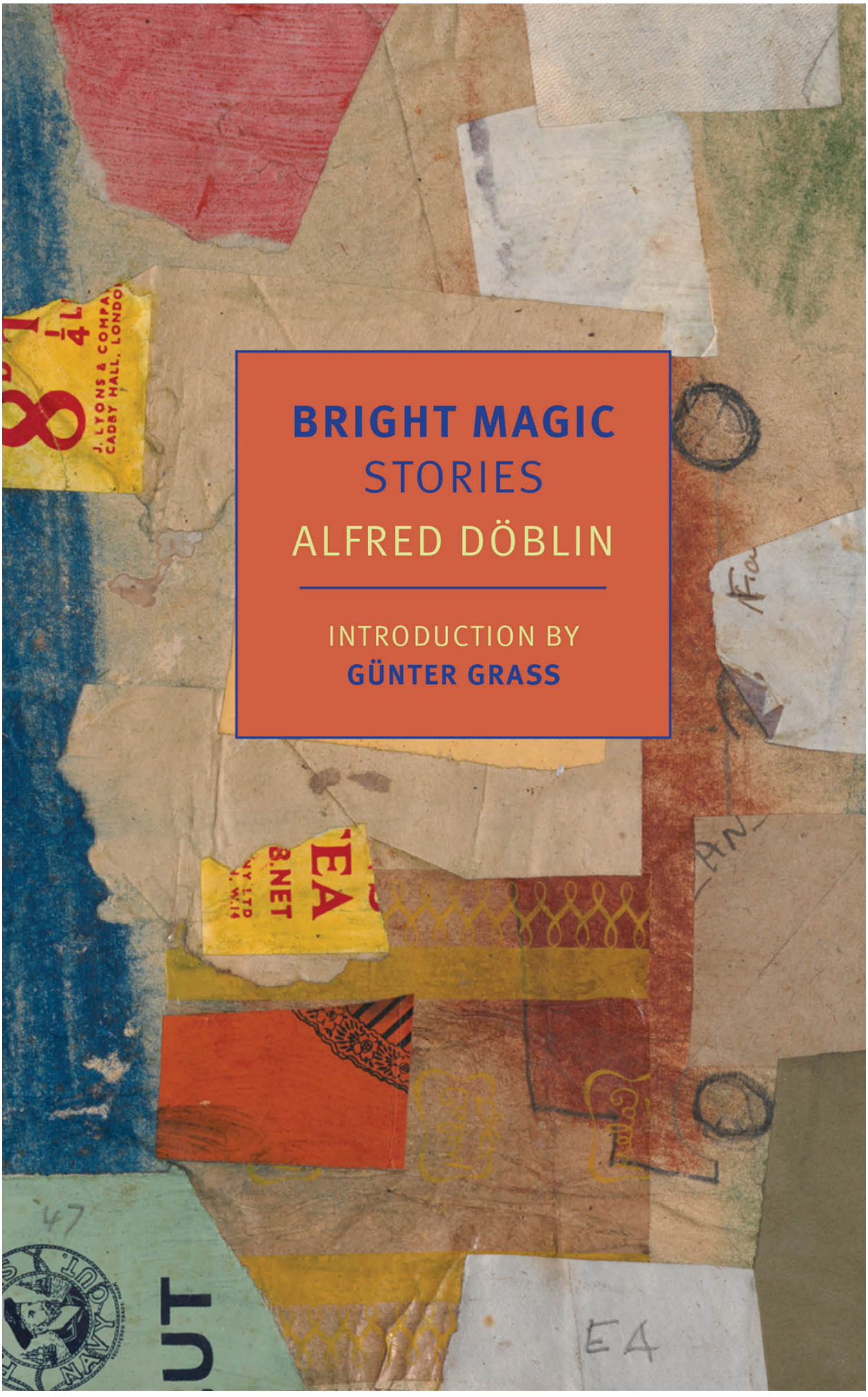
BRIGHT MAGIC
STORIES
ALFRED DÖBLIN
INTRODUCTION BY
GÜNTER GRASS

ALFRED DÖBLIN (1878–1957) was born in German Stettin (now the Polish city of Szczecin), to Jewish parents. When he was ten his father, a master tailor, eloped with a seamstress, abandoning the family. Subsequently his mother relocated the rest of the family to Berlin. Döblin studied medicine at Friedrich Wilhelm University, specializing in neurology and psychiatry. While working at a psychiatric clinic in Berlin, he became romantically entangled with two women: Friede Kunke, with whom he had a son, Bodo, in 1911, and Erna Reiss, to whom he had become engaged before learning of Kunke's pregnancy. He married Erna the next year, and they remained together for the rest of his life. His novel *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun* was published in 1915 while Döblin was serving as a military doctor; it went on to win the Fontane Prize. In 1920 he published *Wallenstein*, a novel set during the Thirty Years' War that was an oblique comment on the First World War. He became president of the Association of German Writers in 1924, and published his best-known novel, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, in 1929, achieving modest mainstream fame while solidifying his position at the center of an intellectual group that included Bertolt Brecht, Robert Musil, and Joseph Roth, among others. He fled Germany with his family soon after Hitler's rise, moving first to Zurich, then to Paris, and, after the Nazi invasion of France, to Los Angeles, where he converted to Catholicism and briefly worked as a screenwriter for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. After the war he returned to Germany and worked as an editor with the aim of rehabilitating literature that had been banned under Hitler, but he found himself at odds with conservative postwar cultural trends. He suffered from Parkinson's disease in later years and died in Emmendingen in 1957. Erna committed suicide two months after his death and was interred along with him.

DAMION SEARLS has translated books by Rilke, Proust, Hermann Hesse, Christa Wolf, and others. For NYRB he has edited Henry David Thoreau's *The Journal* and translated Nescio, Robert Walser, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Patrick Modiano.

GÜNTER GRASS (1927–2015) was born in the Free City of Danzig, to a German father and a Kashubian Polish mother. He published *The Tin Drum* in 1959 and soon became one of Germany's most prominent postwar intellectuals. Throughout his life he was an outspoken Social Democrat and critic of German reunification. He went on to publish numerous novels, including *Crabwalk* and two sequels to *The Tin Drum*: *Cat and Mouse* and *Dog Years*. In 1999, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died in Lübeck at the age of eighty-seven.

BRIGHT MAGIC

Stories

ALFRED DÖBLIN

Selected and translated from the German by

DAMION SEARLS

Introduction by

GÜNTER GRASS

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS

New York

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.nyrb.com

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All stories, except “A Fairy Tale of Technology,” published by S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, in *Die Ermordung einer Butterblume: Gesammelte Erzählungen*. “A Fairy Tale of Technology” published by S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main, in *Schriften zu jüdischen Fragen*.
Günter Grass’s essay, “My Teacher, Alfred Döblin” was originally published as “Über meinen Lehrer Döblin, Rede zum 10.Todestag Döblins am 26. 6. 1967 in Berlin” in *Akzente*, 1967, S. 290–309 and collected in Günter Grass: Essays und Reden, Band I, 1955–1969 (Werkausgabe in 18 Bänden, Band 14).

Cover image: Kurt Schwitters, *Collage*, 1947; bpk, Berlin/Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany/Michael Herling/Benedikt Werner/Aline Gwose/ © Art Resource, NY
Cover design: Katy Homans

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Döblin, Alfred, 1878–1957, author. | Searls, Damion, translator.
Title: Bright magic : stories / by Alfred Döblin ; translated by Damion Searls ; foreword by Günter Grass.
Description: New York : New York Review Books, 2016. | Series: NYRB Classics
Identifiers: LCCN 2015040622 (print) | LCCN 2015050009 (ebook) | ISBN 9781590179734 (paperback) | ISBN 9781590179741 (epub)
Subjects: | BISAC: FICTION / Short Stories (single author). | FICTION / Psychological. | FICTION / Literary.
Classification: LCC PT2607.O35 A2 2016 (print) | LCC PT2607.O35 (ebook) | DDC 833/.912—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015040622

ISBN 978-1-59017-974-1
v1.0

For a complete list of titles, visit www.nyrb.com or write to: Catalog Requests, NYRB, 435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

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INTRODUCTION

My Teacher, Alfred Döblin
SPEECH GIVEN AT THE BERLIN ACADEMY OF ARTS ON JUNE 26, 1967, THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF DÖBLIN'S DEATH

This translation omits a long middle section discussing several of Döblin's other works, in particular the novel Wallenstein.

I NEVER saw him. I imagine him as short, nervous, jumpy, shortsighted and so pulled extra-close to reality; a stenographing visionary, the rush of inspirations leaving him no time to construct painstaking periodic sentences. He starts afresh with every book, refutes himself and his changing theories. Manifestos, essays, books, thoughts follow close on one another's heels, a jostling throng that makes it impossible to see: Where is the author in all this?

When we talk about Alfred Döblin today, to the extent we talk about him at all, it is mostly about *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. This over-simplification of a writer whom I would rank with, and against, Thomas Mann, with and against Bertolt Brecht—this focus solely on a single book has its reasons. The work of a Thomas Mann, of a Bertolt Brecht even more so, consciously conforms to a classicist plan designed by the author and worked out in detail. These writers placed stone after right-angled block of stone on a firm foundation in an easily comprehensible way, not without clues pointing to the classical tradition they were extending. Even when Brecht tried to turn his conceptual system upside down with a play like *The Decision*, he gave up soon enough, making it easy for later interpreters to smooth over this phase of breaking away.

The secondary literature on these two writers is enough to make bookshelves sag and splinter. Soon Brecht, like Kafka, will be interpreted out of reach altogether. Döblin has been spared such abduction into the Olympian realm. This anticlassical writer has never had a community, even a community of enemies; the edition of his works selected for Walter-Verlag by Walter Muschg sits dead in the warehouse.

Generations "indubitably" grew up with Thomas Mann and his vocabulary. The word "Kafkaesque" escapes our lips the moment we run into any bureaucratic difficulty. Our Brechtomaniacs can be easily recognized by their German-word-compounding-inclinations. Only Alfred Döblin occasions no conferences, rarely tempts our industrious literature professors into exegesis, seduces few readers. Even the famous *Alexanderplatz* has not been able to celebrate its homecoming in today's Berlin: However often we find ourselves wanting to run into Franz Biberkopf at this or that corner pub, he has stayed in East Berlin, although the job of distributing the *Berliner Morgenpost* must be tempting for the sometime seller of the populist nationalist newspapers from back then.

All of this is why your lecturer today would like, if he may, to leave Mann, Brecht, and Kafka respectfully to one side, along with all the long shadows cast by their oft-discussed greatness, and instead express the gratitude of a student to his teacher. I owe much to Alfred Döblin; to put it more strongly, I cannot imagine my own prose without the futuristic elements of his books, from *The Three Leaps of Wang-Lun* to *Wallenstein*, *Mountains Seas and Giants*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. In other words: Since writers are never self-made, since we all come from somewhere, let it be said outright that I come from Döblin—from one who, before he grew out of Kierkegaard, had grown out of Charles de Coster, and who, in writing *Wallenstein*, openly confessed this derivation.

Like de Coster's *Thyl Ulenspiegel*, *Wallenstein* is not a historical novel. Döblin sees history as an absurd process. No Hegelian world spirit comes riding across the battlefield toward him. His heroes struggling against absurdity—whether Franz Biberkopf in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or Edward in the *Hamlet* novel—have one thing in common with de Coster's Thyl: Kierkegaardian "integrity," of which there is admittedly little trace in *Wallenstein*, the epic directly influenced by de Coster. In *Wallenstein*, the historical course of absurd events—an absurdity exaggerated to a truly visionary extent—is dissected coldly and impersonally, as though without an author, then repeatedly hurled down and shattered.

But [. . .] let us try to place this book among Döblin's others.

In one of his last essays, "Epilogue," Döblin discusses, in fact dismisses, his own work. Backhanded, perfunctory, impatient, he lists off his titles and at the same time renounces them. The only book that matters to him is his last, *Hamlet; or, The Long Night Comes to an End* [*Tales of a Long Night*]. He has become a Catholic; more than that, with the uncompromising rigor of a convert to Catholicism, he sees

his own work as nothing but vanity. Having already turned away, he casts a look back: “Our wicked soul cannot remain still. . . . Satan walks among us.” The fantast of reason, the cool impartial observer of driven masses and contradictory reality, the instrument registering simultaneous, self-retarding, mutually annihilating movements, the utopian world creator who gave us the blockbuster de-icing of Greenland on the widest possible screen, had been beaten by faith. Now I can no longer follow him.

There he is—Döblin the émigré—reading Kierkegaard in the Bibliothèque Nationale and beginning to turn first Christian, then inexorably Catholic. Someone else reads, what do I know, the Bible and turns Marxist. As a fourteen-year-old, I read *Crime and Punishment*, understood nothing, and understood all too much. The usual gleanings from a book? Hardly. More like the book as a time bomb: Lit by the author, it explodes in the reader’s head. Still, since we can assume that Döblin always had a detonator at the ready —just in case, one day, as if by chance, in the course of hunting down atlases and travel books, alone in the way you can be alone only in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, he should come across the Kierkegaard dynamite—a book’s effects, even if often delayed for decades, must be at least intimated from the start. For we know very little about the effects of books. Even less does the author know where his own words will fall.

On the one hand, the worldly, practical man who shrewdly looks the masses in the face, who puts spoken dialogue into direct and indirect conflict with inner monologue, especially in *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. On the other hand, the inventive brain of a man whose visions and utopias are always in transit, in search of mystical rapture. Where is the author? It’s a duck-rabbit problem, a vase or two silhouettes.[...]

This much is certain: Döblin knew that a book must be more than its author; that the author is merely a means to an end, namely the book; and that an author needs hiding places, from which he emerges to pronounce his manifestos, and to which he then returns to take refuge behind the book.

The opening of Döblin’s “Epilogue” is as follows: “Here we have a pile of books—but ‘here’ is a false word, we should say: the pile exists, the books were written within a span of five decades, but not here.”

After the early-expressionist stories, later collected in the book *The Murder of a Buttercup*, he published his first novel, *The Three Leaps of Wang-Lun*, in 1915, and already he was “here,” if without immediate success.

Wang-Lun, leader of the weak and defenseless, tries to elevate weakness into an ideology and so becomes guilty. The atrocities of the weak and lazy in the Manchu era are comparable with the atrocities of the rulers; Wang-Lun, the gentle berserker, fails and is wiped out. But for all that this thesis fits perfectly into the best German tradition of Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas* and Schiller’s *The Robbers*, what is new—admittedly not without ornamental links to Jugendstil—is the language. New in this novel, and startlingly revolutionary, are the presentations of the crowd scenes: people set in motion storm mountains, become moving mountains, the elements storming with them. With *The Three Leaps of Wang-Lun*, Döblin gave us the first futurist novel.

From that point on, the expressionists around Horvath Walden saw Döblin as a defector. But Döblin, in his open letter to Marinetti, rejected the futurist writers too (not futurist painting, which he continued to admire). He agreed with them insofar as it was a question of getting closer to reality, but Marinetti reduced reality: For him, technology, the naked world of machines, alone was real. Döblin is against any categorical decrees, against a monomaniacal amputation of syntax, against the need to stuff prose full of images, analyses, metaphors; Marinetti should refrain from images, he says, for refraining from images is the task of the prose writer. In Döblin’s actual words: “With or without long periodic sentences, I don’t care. But I don’t want to hear just ‘trumb trumb, tatetereta, etc.’ fifty times over. That requires no great mastery of language. . . . I don’t want any theories to rob me of the particular breathless reality of a battle.”

The passionate letter ends abruptly: “You tend to your Futurism. I’ll tend to my Döblinism!”

A year later, the confident doctor would dabble in no less categorical decrees himself. He published his “Berlin Manifesto,” with its fierce attack on novelists perpetually concerned with the “problems of their inner shortcomings.” For Döblin, “Writing literature is not nail-biting and tooth-picking but a public matter!”

He declares: “The novel’s subject matter is soulless, inanimate reality. The reader, totally independent, is confronted with a formed and finished sequence of events. He may judge it, the author may not.”

Döblin demands, prohibits, lays down rules: “Periodic sentences, permitting the encapsulation of both synchronous complexes and rapid sequences, are to be used extensively. Rapid outpourings, jumbles of isolated key words—seeking as always to achieve the greatest possible exactitude with suggestive turns of phrase. The book as a whole must not seem to be spoken, it must seem to be concretely there.”

[...]

Döblin always wanted to retreat behind his books. In 1928, he answered a newspaper questionnaire by saying: “I as a doctor am only very distantly acquainted with the writer who bears my name.” An autobiographical sketch reveals that he was born in 1878 in Stettin. And: “Medical school, some years as a mental doctor, then transfer to internal medicine, now a practicing specialist in Berlin-East.”

Certain key words accompany our search for this author. To what extent was he shaped by his father, a Stettin tailor who abandoned his wife and five children at age forty and set out across the ocean? Ruminating over his father’s motives, Döblin offered many variations on the story of the father in flight, with biting sarcasm, while indulging his own desire to travel, his need to break away, only on maps and in archives. Prussian rigidity kept him chained to Berlin-East. In April 1923, tempted as he was to venture a short escape and take a trip to Leipzig, he retreated into his obligations and left to posterity only a sigh of regret: “Oh, you’re lucky to be in Leipzig. I have to go back to Ziethen and Scharnhorst.”

So, someone who made do. He found his technology in Siemens and Borsig; homemade manifestos supplied him with his myth of the turbine for *Wadzek’s Battle with the Steam Turbine*. A world creator with a permanent residence? A new German Romantic, a new Jean-Paul, among the card catalogs?

Still in search of the author. . . . He remains short, nervous, jumpy, shortsighted, and nonetheless a man engaged with the politics of the day, unafraid of getting his hands dirty. Member of the Independent Social Democratic Party from 1921, later of the Social Democratic Party. His Prussian character enabled him both to patiently pursue all the tedious minutiae of party activity and also, later, when the Social Democrats helped pass the 1926 antiobscenity law against “filth and trash,” to leave the party, without needing to announce that he had been radicalized, had burned his bridges, had been greatly disappointed.

Döblin dared to live with his contradictions. The fashionable dance move so diligently rehearsed down to the present—the dance of distancing oneself from things—was not his style. He made the case for the Social Democrats in countless essays. However much he admired the “clear historical and economic penetration of reality” in Marx’s writings, he saw the Marxism of the twentieth century as nothing but a doctrine of harsh centralization, blind faith in economics, and militarism. The licensed doctor in Berlin-East admitted that he belonged to neither a German nor a Jewish nation: His nation was that of the children and the mad.

So, a philanthrope and daydreamer? A productive crank? An active Social Democrat, singing a hymn to mystical India in his free-verse epic *Manas*? What else? He was a verbose despiser of art and a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts; an emancipated Jew and a Kierkegaardian Catholic; a sedentary Berliner and a restless armchair traveler until Nazi writers like Erwin Kolbenheyer and Hans Grimm seized power along with Hitler and he was driven out, set in motion against his will by the emigration.

He returned home as a French officer with his last novel, the *Hamlet* novel, which no one in West Germany would publish. Only in 1956 did it come out, in the GDR. How does that hackneyed saying go in the “Land of Poets and Thinkers”? *Forgotten in his lifetime.* Döblin just didn’t sit right. He didn’t come across. He was too Catholic for the progressive left, too anarchist for the Catholics, too lacking in concrete arguments for the moralists; he was too crude for late-night television, too vulgar for school radio. Neither *Wallenstein* nor his science-fiction epic *Mountains Seas and Giants* could be easily consumed, and Döblin the emigrant had ventured to return in 1946 to a Germany about to prescribe itself a stiff dose of consumption. So much for his market position. Döblin’s value was and is not quoted on the exchange. A piece of his inheritance has fallen to one of his followers and students, in the form of fame, and today, with the small change I have, I am trying to pay him back.

Despite discussing only his futurist output here, following only one path through the many strands of the Döblin universe, a system of production that remained productive to the end—despite drawing your attention to *Wallenstein* as a futurist novel and thereby downplaying the political Döblin, the essayistic Döblin, the Catholic Döblin—I hope that this tribute, ten years after the death of my teacher, will at least do its part to make you curious, to lure you to Döblin, so that he might be more widely read. He will unsettle you; he will give you bad dreams; you will have to gulp him down, and he won’t taste good; he is indigestible and not even nutritious. Döblin changes the reader. If you’re satisfied with yourself, beware of Alfred Döblin.

—GÜNTER GRASS

Part 1

EARLY STORIES

THE SAILBOAT RIDE

THE OSTEND dike lay in the flashing noonday sun. The men and women in their finery strolled past one another on the wide sea promenade, laughing. The windows of the beach houses sparkled affectionately up from under the reflections on the immeasurable water. The unceasing roar of the sea rolled away from the stone embankments, swelled back up again, swelled away again every time.

The heavy Brazilian walked with an open mouth among the men and women in their finery. He walked right next to the promenade's sea railing. His head was bowed, as though standing under a shower; his full lips were moist. Black hair streaked with white hung over his ears. He inclined his head with its Panama hat to left and right, to meet the onslaught of the biting wind. He cast a happy glance now and then at the gray-green water. His yellow-brown, puffy face twitched; his eyes, sunk in gray caves, shimmered; he tried to follow the delicate eddies of air that ran around his bare neck, lifted the gray hair on his temples, and whirred against his cheeks with their fine stilettos. He was a little cold; he looked down along his white shirtfront, white sunshine flowing over it, and for a moment the thought that his gaze might be casting shadows made him nervous. He sighed and pushed his way deeper into the crowd of people.

He could still feel within him the shuddering of the railroad train that had brought him to the seaside from Paris the day before.

He had left Paris in great haste, sailed in great haste on his yacht from his homeland across the ocean, out of hopeless happiness, suddenly conscious of his forty-eighth year. In Paris he had endured the debaucheries of art for four months—the polished concert halls, the bestial dances; pneumonia laid him low; he was in the hospital for weeks, given up for lost. When he left the hospital one Sunday, knees weak, he tugged up the collar of his loden cape, climbed into an open carriage, and drove to the station. He spent a day slinking, doubled over, through Bruges, the dead city. Then he picked himself up and hurried to Ostend in the July heat.

He raised his gaze from the thin sand pulling away under his feet.

She glided past him a second time—rust-colored hair beneath a broad-brimmed white hat. A gray gaze from an intelligent, no longer young face shrank back from him. She was perhaps in her mid-thirties. He could still hear a high melodious voice behind him.

Copetta turned around at the sound of this voice. Just then, the wind stopped slicing. She was talking to an old woman, supporting her arm. The Brazilian pushed back his hat; just as his gaze passed over her narrow shoulders, black shawl over dark blue silk, he lost her. The white hat bobbed over the crowd of people and disappeared around a corner.

Copetta ambled into a café, drank spoonfuls of hot chocolate. The sea rolled incessantly against the stone embankments, soft scratching of grains of sand, wind striking with thin stilettos.

In the afternoon, when it was time for the concert at the resort, the heavy Brazilian walked in a long gray frock coat along the dike. The music wafted over, light and brazen. As he pounded the ground with his thick yellow walking stick, step by step, in front of the resort, a gray gaze shrank back from him again. The old woman spoke to her. Her face was thin, her cheekbones jutted out sharply, her small eyes under their thin red brows looked out decisive and sober, she had freckles above the bridge of her nose, crow's-feet extended from the corners of her eyes. She swayed as she walked.

The Brazilian rubbed his forehead and eyes, involuntarily stopped, ambled on.

Around evening, he was sitting on the terrace of his hotel. As he picked up the wine list, it struck him that he had seen a woman three times that day, rust-colored hair beneath a hat bobbing up and down; three times, a woman, black shawl over dark-blue silk; a gray gaze. He silently shoved his chair back, and sighing, smiling, staring into space, pulled out his wallet and carried his wide visiting card into the villa into which he had seen her disappear and handed it to a girl. As he felt the sea breeze on his neck again, he asked himself what the point of it actually was. He resoundingly slammed the door to his room shut behind him, threw himself into a desk chair in the dim room, tore the pictures of his two children into little pieces, picked up a pair of nail scissors, took off his gem-encrusted wedding ring, put it on the blade, and held it over the flame of a burning candle. The gems carbonized; the scissors got hot; he dropped them. He burrowed with both arms into the two large buckets of beach sand he had had brought to his room, stood up with a groan, blindly strewed sand across the floor and the carpet, and softly cursed those dogs, the porters, who had not brought enough sand. Fell asleep in his chair.

When, at midday, again on the terrace, lying back in his chair, he breathed in the brisk air and dizzily

closed his eyes, the image of the walking woman stood before him—very thin faded face, clear determined gaze aiming right at him. She had sent a request that he not visit her during the day. He threw the thin blanket off his feet, shoved his hat down over his disheveled hair, and walked ponderously, arms folded over his chest, down the stairs and across the empty sunny promenade up to her villa, a one-story building with narrow, closed windows. He squeezed through a dark corridor and knocked lightly on the door that had a visiting card with her name on it. Not a sound. He flung open the door.

She was lying half in bed; to jump out she had to throw the blue blanket back toward the wall. Two full womanly legs were just making contact with the floor with their delicate toes; a very thin, severe body in a simple loose nightgown straightened up, a serious thin face under loosened hair.

Distressed, the dark Brazilian stopped in the doorway. She smiled, covered herself, and asked him to come back in fifteen minutes. Deathly pale, without saying a word, he picked his walking stick up off the floor. The girl held out her hand to him; he looked into small sober eyes.

That evening a messenger from his hotel arrived at her house; he was inviting her on a sailboat ride the next morning; he had not even signed his name on the card. She turned the substantial sheet of notepaper back and forth in her hand, half involuntarily picked up a pencil, and wrote on the same sheet of paper that he should come, he should come bright and early. Under her initial, L., she added a marvelous flourish that it took her almost a minute to draw.

She was out her door at the break of dawn and she ran to him in thin shantung silk; she leapt down the narrow stone staircase and hurried down to the murmuring beach; she threw mussel shells back at him and saw, when she turned toward him, a passionate trembling in his face. He was dressed all in white linen, bareheaded, left hand bandaged at the wrist; he said he had cut a vein last night when he fell on some glass. He sent a small rowboat gliding into the water with a single shove, lifted the squealing woman onto its bench, jumped after her, and rowed in leisurely fashion toward a sailboat floating in the men's bathing area by the wooden bridge. They jumped aboard; Copetta was already pulling up anchor; her bare arms held tight to the rudder bench, the wooden rings clattered softly on the mast, the mainsail bellowed open after a puff of wind; the boat headed out to sea.

They moved through the beach spray into the gray-green sea. A white glow came over the sharp horizon line, stronger every moment and climbing higher. They sailed fast and smooth on the strong morning wind. Then the Brazilian crouched down on the deck next to the boom and secured the rigging. Laughing wildly, he stood up with legs spread, swung a thin rope around his head like a lasso, and threw it over her; caught, she shivered, jerked herself free, balled up the rope and flung it against his chest with a girlish giggle. She had quickly tied the rudder in place and leaned overboard; she scooped up cold seawater and splashed it over her face, and, one foot on the rowing bench, sleeves dripping, threw two big handfuls at him. He caught the salt water in his open mouth, savored, swallowed. They let the boat take its course in the squalls of wind and it started to shiver like a restless animal. They chased each other across the deck. The thin woman leapt onto the rowing bench with a hoot and beat her fists against the rigging. She pulled off her thin coat, whistled, and spun around. Her thin-lipped mouth opened often in short, childish laughs.

The broad-shouldered Brazilian sat downcast on the edge of the boat; he listened, distressed, to her laughter, held her head with his lips trembling and eyebrows raised as she laid it on his knees and looked at him curiously. His rock-hard hands pushed away her upward-striving shoulders; he shook his head no, back and forth. The waves crept up overboard, lapped gently down at them on the deck like little dogs. The wind picked up strength. The boat tilted heavily to one side, the fringe of the mainsail started to flutter, they shot ahead before the wind. The Brazilian's dark, almost glassy eyes looked off into the distance over her dripping hair, the girl sought out his mouth, his neck, with her head bent back, she felt around at his chest. His puffy wrinkled face was calm, as though a solemn promise filled with happiness were constantly circling him. The boat rocked with no one at the helm; wave after wave rolled in. Copetta sat on the edge of the hull. When a high wall of water crashed into the boat, he spread his arms wide and leaned back into the wave as though into a pillow. The cushion slid back. She heard him murmur something; she saw the intoxicated, incommunicative look with which he disappeared.

A jolt of the boat threw her against the mast. She felt no pain in her bleeding arm. She screamed for help to the place he had been, let out long shrill cries. They soon found her in the drifting boat. Back on land they were expecting her. They knew everything; Copetta had sent a telegram to the authorities.

She stayed with the old woman another week in the one-story villa. Then she was told that she had thrown herself onto the floor-boards in the middle of the dining room in front of other people, several times, clutching the air with her hands. That the maid had watched from outside how she stood in the middle of her room in broad daylight, spinning around. On the afternoon of the day she was told this,

she and the manservant packed her bags and she put on a black dress, left her mother, and went to Paris.

She took a small room and walked the streets. She wore her red hair up, her lips and cheeks made up. She did not come home for days at a time. She denied herself to no one. It was a pleasure for her to throw herself into the arms of every desk worker and cattle hand. With an indifferent laugh and a shake of the head, she made herself the prey of any disease that came her way and passed it along with kisses, yawns, and ardor. After a few months, she was slipping into the glittering ballrooms in black silk dresses. Her face had grown fuller; her small eyes glittered from the atropine. The young men called her the Hyena. She had an unusual way of moving in the ballrooms. The dance was clearly born from an awkwardness in the dancer, showing itself from her first step out onto the parquet. She shoved away every hand reaching for her, swayed her hips side to side in front of her partner, but slowly, like a sailor rocking his weight from one leg to the other. Then she wrapped her awkward feet around her partner and now they were swaying together, hip attached to hip, but he jumped back from her raised arms, she sought him, bent down over him, and eventually they were no longer waltzing, she was letting herself be half carried by her partner while her feet barely brushed the floor and she closed her eyes.

She let a year pass over her. One evening, when the mailman brought her a letter along with a gigantic bouquet of flowers, she turned the substantial sheet of notepaper back and forth in her manicured hands. She threw the flowers in the trash, tugged her lemon-yellow kimono closed over her chest, sat down at the desk, and fiddled with the heavily perfumed piece of paper. The messenger was still waiting at the door, he had already put the cap of his uniform back on, when she stood up and asked him to send a cable. She seemed as though illuminated; she adopted an imperious air. She telegraphed Ostend: TO MR COPETTA OSTEND HOTEL ESTRADA EXPECT ME TOMORROW NOON. WIRE REPLY REQUESTED. She stood trembling on the steps for an hour, awaiting an answer. She packed hand luggage. After three hours she sent for a carriage, put on a thin yellow shantung silk suit, drove to the station. The train ran overnight, many long hours, via Brussels, Ghent, Bruges; finally, early the next morning, Ostend. She rattled through the familiar narrow streets of the city. Suddenly, between the buildings, the sea shone forth, the gray-green sea. She stood upright in the rattling droshky as the gusty wind lavished a hail of stilettos on her. She screamed with homesickness and bliss, standing up in the carriage, she raised her parasol and waved hello to the gray-green sea. She set foot in her old room again, half heard that her mother had died in this house, many months ago already. Her face was still; when the pension lady asked her, outraged, why she was sitting there laughing like that, she answered, “Because I’m happy, my dear woman, why else does someone laugh if not from happiness. What were you saying?”

Then, with gentle movements like a beautiful young woman’s, she picked up her white parasol and walked down to the sea. The dike lay in the flashing noonday sun. The windows of the beach houses sparkled affectionately up from under the reflections in the immeasurable water. The sea roared without cease, threw itself against the stone embankments and lay down flat. She pushed deftly through the crowd of people in their finery, slipped into the hotel lobby. The porter gave her the telegram; he told her that the gentleman had had an accident on a sailboat outing a year ago. She clutched her chest: “In the ocean here?” And then she pressed a coin into his hand, dashed a few lines with her address onto a sheet of paper, whispered in his ear to keep this note anyway and give it at once to the gentleman who had had the accident, if he should happen to come in this evening. She walked out onto the promenade with a smile, past the astonished porter; accepted a young man who followed her; and listened, face beaming, sipping hot chocolate with him at the chapel that afternoon, to the brazen light music of the concert at the resort.

Evening arose. The full moon hung white as snow above the tremendous water.

She stood at her window and waited. Night fell; she had already impatiently put the floppy white hat on her rust-red hair. She ran on the tips of her toes down the dark hallway, looked down the long beach promenade lying in the dazzling white moonlight. Then she ran back and forth on the long promenade, holding tight to her hat that the wind kept pulling off her, played with her shadow falling black before her, danced for him out on the street, whistling, thumbed her nose at him. She peeked at the hotel to see whether his window was lit yet. At twelve o’clock, she fell asleep sitting in her bed; around four, she startled awake in horror; it was already bright daylight. “He’s beat me to it.” She rushed out the door, threw her arms in the air with a jeer, shouted her name, hooted too. In a trice she was down the narrow stone staircase. She looked for the place the boats left from, ran to the bathhouses. Rowboats large and small lay moored there. No male footprints fresh in the sand! She pulled off her shoes and stockings, threw her hat onto the beach, tied up her skirt, tugged at a mooring rope, panting. Then she jumped in, pulled the oars. She was thrown back by the surf only a little before moving confidently out.

The wind blew hard across the open water; fat raindrops fell; no sail, no boat, as far as the eye could see. Her boat crawled up the high curved walls of the waves, plunged several feet down, crawled on

undaunted. She looked around in all directions; fear overcame her. She screamed, crawling on her knees, shrieking his name out across the seething water from the crest of every wave, but now it wasn't gentle puppies lapping over the side of the boat—like rockslides the waves crashed onto the chest of the breathless woman wiping her eyes. Already flagging, she laid down the oars, broke into furious sobs, and was desperately beating her breast when a dark shape rose up from the water next to the boat. On the crest of a wave the dark shape swung into the boat. The Brazilian sat silently on the edge of the boat and let his legs hang down onto the rowing bench. He was swollen shapeless; his white suit bulged over his body. His gray-white hair was thickly crusted with salt; black-green seaweed hung in tufts over his dripping wet, yellow-brown face with its quivering mouth. Thin white sand and mussel shells trickled off his broad shoulders, ran out of his sleeves. He exhaled loudly then breathed more quietly. Slowly he raised his right arm and warded off the woman exultantly jumping up from the floor. His deep dark eyes looked questioningly at her, her full womanly face, her ripened lips, her small lively eyes beneath their red brows, now beaming inspired and longingly. Then he looked past her. Under a lashing rain they tumbled down between the mountains of the waves; she could not hear her own furious cries through the singing and whistling of the storm. He lowered his arm, leaned back into the wave as though into a pillow. The cushion slid back. She saw how he slowly turned his head toward her, saw the intoxicated, communicative gaze looking at her, leapt after him, and now they entwined their thick swollen arms; now she laughed, gurgling, and pressed her head against his bloated one. And as they touched the wet waves together, his face turned young; her face turned young and youthful. Their mouths did not let each other go; their eyes looked at each other's under closed lids. A mass of water, strong as iron, sent the immeasurable gray-green sea toward them. A giant's hand lifted them up into the racing clouds. The purple blackness closed over them. They swirled down into the raging sea.

THE BALLERINA AND THE BODY

WHEN SHE was eleven it was decided that she would be a dancer. With her tendency to contort her limbs, her grimaces, and her strange temperament, she seemed well suited for the job. Her every step ridiculous up until then, she now learned how to compel her elastic ligaments, her too-straight joints; she crept warily, patiently, in and farther in to her toes, her ankles, her knees, rapaciously assailed her thin shoulders and the curve of her slender arms, kept careful watch over the play of her taut body. She succeeded in throwing cold water over the most voluptuous dance.

At eighteen, she had a slim figure, slight as silk, overlarge dark eyes. A face almost boyish, long and angular. A high clipped voice, with nothing flirtatious, no music; a quick, impatient walk. She was loveless, and looked clear-eyed at her untalented colleagues, bored by their complaints.

At nineteen, she caught a pallid and lingering disease, so that her face shimmered fantastically pale before her blue-black bob. Her limbs grew heavy, but she continued to perform. When she was alone she stamped her feet, threatened her body, struggled with it. She spoke of her weakness to no one. She gnashed her teeth at the stupid, childish thing she had learned simply to overcome.

When Ella bit her lips in pain, her mother threw herself onto the sofa and cried for hours. After a week, the old woman reached a decision and told her daughter, looking down at the floor, that she should put an end to this and go to the hospital. Ella answered not a word, only cast a hateful look at the wrinkled, hopeless face before her.

She went to the hospital the next day. In the carriage she sobbed with rage beneath her blanket. She wanted to spit on her suffering body, she jeered at it bitterly; it disgusted her, this bad flesh whose company she was bound to. Her eyes widened with muted fear when she looked at these limbs now eluding her. How powerless she was, oh how powerless she was. They clattered over the paved courtyard. The hospital gates shut behind her. The dancer saw, with revulsion, doctors and patients. The nurses gently lifted her into bed.

Now the dancer unlearned to speak. She no longer heard the imperious note in her voice. It all happened without her willing it. But people paid attention to every utterance of her body and treated it with the utmost seriousness. Daily, almost hourly, they asked the dancer about the things of that body and painstakingly wrote out what she said in their files; at first she grew reluctant, then she marveled at it ever more deeply. She soon drifted into dark anxiety, and a sense of teetering over the abyss; a dread of this body overcame her. She did not dare to touch it, even brush against it; she stared at her arms, her breasts; she shuddered when she looked at herself for a long time in the mirror. Her mouth gulped down the medicine she gave it to drink; she went with the bitter drops as they ran down inside and pondered what it would make of them, it, the body, this childish thing, oh, the domineering, the dark. She turned small as a fly; at night, mortal agony stood behind her bed. Her eyes, seeing into the uncanny, grew rigid. The mocking girl with the boyish face was now pious, and prayed with the sisters before nightfall. Her mother was horrified when she came to see her daughter. Her child had never been this timid, this needy. “We are all in God’s hands,” the mother consoled the wasted ruin clinging to her. “Yes,” the dancer whispered, “we are all in God’s hands.”

The regular bustling around her calmed her back down, and the horror vanished as quickly as it had descended. Dislike of the patients in the ward flared up. And indignation lingered in her sharp features, so people deferred to it—to the rotted, the rotting—and looked away from her as though she were dead. That offended the magisterial dancer. She caged her body, laid it in chains. It was her body now, her property, at her disposal. This was the house where she lived; they should leave her house alone. Every day they struck her chest with hammers and eavesdropped on the chatter of her heart. They drew her heart on her chest so that everyone could see it, dragged into the light what before had lain hidden within. Oh how they despoiled her. With every question they asked, they carried off another piece of her. They rushed in on her with poisons finer than needles and tubes; they knew all her tricks, drove her fully back into her foxhole. The thieves took everything from her, everything, so it came as no surprise to her that she got weaker every day and lay there deathly pale. Now she turned bitter, and defended herself. She lied to the doctors, refused to answer their questions, concealed her pain. And when they wanted to question her again, she stiffened in bed, turned the sisters away, in a sudden burst of hate even laughed in the head-shaking doctors’ faces and twisted her own into a mocking expression.

But she couldn’t keep up her forced bravado for long. Daily, ceaselessly, the white coats walked through the corridors, tapped at the patients, wrote everything up. Daily and hourly the nurses came

bringing sustenance and potions: the dancer tired of them. She tossed the toy right back; hollowly contemptuous, she let it happen. It didn't matter to her what happened. A childish thing was lying there, making her miserable; why should she fight for it, why should she envy the honors shown it? She rested, limp, in her bed. The body kept lying, a piece of carcass, under her; its pains were of no concern to her. When it stabbed and tormented her at night, she told it, "Calm down until the rounds tomorrow; tell it to the doctors, your doctors, and leave me alone." They were doing business with another party; the body could take care of dealing with the doctors. "It's already in the file." With that she cut short their pestering.

She often felt a smiling sympathy for this dumb sick little child that lay in her bed. She calmly and conscientiously reported what was oppressing it. Indifferently, slightly ironically, she watched the doctors and ironically confirmed the unsuccess of their efforts. A sense of suspense, of hilarity, came over her again, and a wild, churning schadenfreude at the misfortune of the doctors and the deterioration of the body. Pressing her mouth into the pillow as she laughed, she had regained her old derision and her coldness.

When soldiers marched past the hospital at midday, with their loud marching music, the dancer sat up precipitously in bed, with shining eyes, lips pressed tight, doubled over. After a while, a sharp if soft voice called the nurse over to the bed. The dancer wanted to embroider something, and requested silk and linen. She quickly dashed off a strange picture on the white fabric with a pencil. Three figures: a round, shapeless body on two legs, with no arms or head, nothing but a two-legged fat ball. Next to him towered a tall meek man with giant glasses, stroking the body with a thermometer. But while he was busy in all seriousness with the body, a little girl on the other side of him, hopping barefoot, thumbed her nose at him with her left hand and stabbed a sharp pair of scissors into the body from below with her right, so that the body drained out in a thick spurt like a barrel.

The dancer crudely embroidered the picture in red thread, laughing merrily to herself.

She wanted to dance again, to dance.

As before, when she had thrown cold water over everything voluptuous in the dance, when her taut body had wavered like a flame, she wanted to feel her will again. She wanted to dance a waltz, a wonderful sweet waltz, with the one who had become her master, with the body. With a movement of her will she could take him by the hand once more, this body, the slothful beast, and fling it down, fling it around, and it was no longer her master. A triumphant hate churned up from inside her—it didn't go to the right and she to the left, but she, they, leapt together. She wanted to roll him on the ground, that hobbling dwarfish barrel, trundle it head over heels, stuff sand in its maw.

She cried, with a voice that quite suddenly had turned hoarse, for the doctor. Doubled over, she looked him in the face from below while he stared in amazement at the embroidery, then said up at him, in a calm voice, "You . . . You idiot . . . You idiot, you pussy." And, throwing off the blanket, stabbed herself in the left breast with the sewing scissors. A shrill scream hung somewhere in the corner of the ward. Even in death, the ballerina had a cold contemptuous look about her mouth.

ASTRALIA

HERR GÖTTING, Adolf Götting, independent scholar, residing at 15 Albrechtstrasse, 4R, in a room at Frau Schülke's. He sits on a couch in his room and warms himself with the lamp. A beaten-down little man with shriveled, yellowish face, inflamed eyes, and a quick soft voice. His fingers play with the fringe of the brown wool blanket lying across his thin legs.

With abrupt movements of the hand, the little man is instructing his wife, a pale pleasant thing sitting with hands folded on a chair across from him, that practice is the basis of culture and that he knows what he is talking about. Too, the apple must has had a pleasant effect on his stomach and various respective mucous membranes and will probably soon be converted in his intestines to wine. The power that life has to transform things is without measure, he said. He knows what he is talking about.

The wilted wife gently breathes a word about the damp autumn air, about the overexcitements of a meeting, about so much drinking.

Meanwhile the catarrhal little man slowly lifts, with spread fingers, the wool blanket off of his legs and puts it next to him on the couch. Shuffling with bent legs he walks to the window, creaks it open, and looks out into the night sky.

His voice sounds patient and pious.

"I should not consult you, Elfriede. You do not know what you're saying. It's a new moon today. You understand what I mean."

He says it—"It's a new moon today"—with utter simplicity, no pathos.

"The inner state, the inner state. If we keep it ready, we have done all. Today is a new moon. I will prevail over everything from the inside out. Just as I have already prevailed over other hardships. And the apple must"—all at once a joy, a celebration, rings out in his voice—"don't you see? It oils the inner state, makes it nimble, and then it can leap freely, into the air, where it is free. It can leap up. Or in the fields, or into the potatoes—it doesn't matter. And there's something else, Elfriede: It can chirp, the inner state. It can warble for every ear, chirp, sing, be believed."

The light flickers, the lamp smokes.

But when the pale distressed woman looks into the light, the little man sighs.

The gentle creature wafts over to the little man and ties a brown stocking, darned in black, around his neck.

"Dress warm, my dear Adolf. Put on your truss, too; it's lying on your bed. Oh, all this staying out so late. No."

The puffy loving nonentity lets the little man press her hands then vanishes from the room.

Herr Götting, Adolf Götting, independent scholar, residing at 15 Albrechtstrasse, 4R, in a room at Frau Schülke's. Author of a history of the major errors in human conduct from the Fall of Man to the present, Schultze & Velhagen Publishers, Berlin, 1903, three hundred and seventy quarto pages, hardcover, four marks, member of numerous religious societies. Founded the Free Brotherhood of Astralia, currently at work on *The Inner Life and Its Physical Manifestation*. Now he is walking on the city ramparts in blackest darkness, heavy fog. He is going for a walk, because he is a thinker. He knows that he is a thinker; his wife doesn't.

The beaten-down little man walks beneath the black elm trees and presses his handkerchief to his mouth and nose. He is no mere dilettante, he is more than a thinker, he is a herald, a seer, biding his time. He walks content, happy, with a certain longing; with his little eyes he plucks thoughts down from the trees, like apples. The years are long past when something bitter and black used to creep here by the elm trees, reaching out its hands. They were quiet when he talked, but before long they started to snigger and nudge each other. And the stares, and squeaks, and suppressed laughter, as the little mandrake monotonously sang out his teachings, his repentant sanctimonious windbaggery, waving his long arms around, and suddenly broke off and listened stiffly into the noise. Then he hid away at home and brooded on people's behavior. The weakened little mandrake could hate his fellow man then, he threatened and cursed, but soon was shocked by his thirst for revenge and wept in despair because the power had after all not been granted him.

One day, though, a miracle will take place, that is why he skulks longingly beneath the elms in the stormy night. Then they will believe and not mock. One petrified night of fear it became a certainty for him. From the inside out it will seize him, touch him, if his inner state has piled up high enough; it will transform him, he himself does not know quite how. His arms will no longer be long and skinny like a

monkey's; his voice will no longer grate. A halo will appear over his head.

"Hello, God's blessing be with you and all good spirits." The little brotherhood, respectable men thin and fat, stands up to greet their leader in the low tavern on the ramparts.

They drink apple must from wooden mugs and praise the immortal soul. One after the other speaks. All goods must be shared in common, and the killing of animals is murder, and if humanity does not turn inward soon and take stock, the end of the world is near.

They drink apple must. They hold the prayers, bound in blue, in plump dirty hands, and sing "I know my Redeemer lives," and he is near, the sole of his foot already stands upon the earth.

They smoke from long black pipes with skulls on them, puffing vigorously.

A beaten-down little man with shriveled, yellow face, inflamed eyes, and a quick soft voice stands up at one corner of the table, cheeks red.

He cries out into the excited clinking of glasses: that the Prophet is nigh, that the awaited one will cast down the unbelievers, peoples and kings and brothers. He must come soon. The sweet drink makes the little man blissfully happy. The future has prepared itself in silence, he says, like a child in a pregnant woman; who knows in what sorrow. He assures the brothers that it is so. The great war will break out, in which people will destroy one another; already the tension on earth cannot grow any greater, already the world is bristling with weapons and only the peaceful are superfluous. The Savior is standing already in the clouds, ready to complete his work, in the clouds that are his own words.

They drink apple must. They open the little door of the tavern to the new-moon night.

Suddenly all fall silent.

One stands up, speaking incoherent words.

They are scared.

Secret things are taking place—

The next morning, a wizened thing with skinny legs scrapes out the tavern door.

At first it staggers, and its hands seek, grab for every handhold, post, tree, garden fence. Then it walks straight and firm. Its head sunk on its left shoulder; nostrils swollen; watery, fixed, half-open eyes. It walks half naked: in shirtsleeves, with no boots, no hat. It flings its legs far forward with every step, arms pressed together over chest. When the people up on the elm alley stop and look—a little milkmaid with her tin canister and two street sweepers, sleepy white faces—the wizened thing recoils.

They are looking at it. It has to walk straight, yes, walk in a straight line.

It sings out a song. . . .

It slowly wends its way, barefoot, blissful, tipsy, suffering, borne on a heavy dark cloud. It stands in the clouds, the clouds that are his own words.

A hot shudder suddenly passes over the little man. What if it had happened, the unbelievable thing, the transformation, overnight!

The two street sweepers had stared at him. He straightens up, raises his head, then lets it fall again. It was the holy night of a new moon. And for something to emanate from him: an awe, a glow, from his brow, from his hair. To captivate people, vanquish them. It can't be possible.

Humming, quietly singing and dreaming, the creature walks on.

Down below in the narrow streets, the barbers, the clerks, the bakers are bumping and jostling; they converge and whisper. Herr Götting suddenly hears a mean-spirited laugh right out in the open, like none he has ever heard. And now he is deeply appalled in a happy horror: It has happened, the miracle has taken place, the Lord has brought it to pass. Let them curse and spew! Let them! And he has firm ground under his feet, he is not dreaming, he breathes the cool morning air. He is standing with the soles of both feet on the earth.

As he turns onto the main street, where the shops are just opening, gangs of schoolboys run after him, push and shove, roar loud, jump nervously away.

The suffering of all these years is forgotten. Oh, thanks be to He who governs all. Hosannah to thee, oh Lord!

The little man climbs the stairs to his apartment, 15 Albrechtstrasse. In the hallways, the people are struck dumb when he looks at them. Then a long muttering starts up behind his back and is still sounding when he tugs the bell pull. The little man crosses the threshold with a smile, the strange man looks the fat melancholy female in the eye as she scurries around the room where the wizened man stands, head slumped onto his left shoulder, arms pressed together over his chest, and love in his mouth and his watery, squinting eyes. His two hands reach out for her. Flooded with a sweetness and earnestness he says in a soft voice, "You see, you see—oh, I knew it, Elfriede. Now I have come back."

She holds tight to the windowsill, looks at the little man, and screams, "Adolf!"

"Yes, Elfriede. I have kept myself in readiness for Him, through all hardships. I waited and hoped for

so long. Endured such bitterness. But rejoice, all those who waited with me!”

“Have you been walking around like that, Adolf? The whole way? Tell me, Adolf. Like that? You’re not wearing a coat, and no boots, and no hat!”

The eyes facing her stop; a face cools, a voice that has abruptly hardened to stone answers her: “I already told you, are you too among the band of Korah? Rise up and begone, so that I am not made unclean.”

The shrill scurrilous laughter from the corridor and stairway echoes into the room. “Adolf, what happened? Where did you leave your things?”

The little man stared fixedly at his feet, his hands flutter over his chest, his head sinks slowly forward.

“The boots. The band of Korah. Yes, what is the woman saying? What is the woman in this room trying to say?”

And then he roars with a voice of iron, overflowing eyes turned toward the door, “Don’t laugh, don’t laugh! There’s nothing to laugh at here!” And suddenly light dawns, he runs to the bed, hides his head under the blanket, and stammers, “Oh, don’t laugh. . . . Please, please, don’t laugh. Oh, I beg you, I’m begging, beg-ging. . . .”

Then she can only hold the trembling half-naked little man.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

MARY WALKED pale and quiet-eyed through the damp short grass.

When the foliage hung thick and high, Mary looked for a certain broad-branched tree standing alone behind a cluster of bushes grown together into a tracery, in a copse the men avoided. The green of the leaves melted into the silken twilight colors of the air; then too bronze-dark, rose-slight, yellow-toned, or snowy girls' bodies, loving each other, blossomed beneath it. The foliage hung thick and fell deeply down.

When wild rain poured, Maria sat with her playfellows at the window of their large room, with their white robes shading into bluishness and almond branches in their hair; all the lips sang songs of entreaty to the rain god. But she screamed with happiness when she saw a little child. She went over to it with slow footsteps, picked it up, and, sitting down, lightly rocking with her knees, held it in her lap. Sometimes in her dandling she stopped still, looked long at the white particles of sundust and dark blue sky, gave a sudden shudder with shivering shoulders, and dandled the child some more.

A faithful friend was courting her. But the virginal maiden could not answer the supplicant's soft entreaties.

Once, when the girls were enjoying their youth in gentle pleasure with kisses and embraces under the broad-branched tree, they saw, through a skyward gap in the leaves, a black, unfathomably large and wide grasping cloud-hand, inescapably like a hand of God. Their song rose restlessly up, they comforted each other, at last they fled from each other, the white-robed and the colored-robed, ducking under the leaves, while a gray-blue light far behind the hills appeared and peered over from the sky's darkness, ever brighter and more often. Between black and erect rows of trees, which started to bend and writhe, robes fluttered before the wind. The friend had run to meet Mary, after waiting a long time wandering around her lonely house; the disheveled and frightened maiden clung to him and would not let go of his arm. Her pale, confused glances kept worrying and quivering over to the outstretched cloud-fingers and lurid light. When the earth began to shake and a voice of thunder with blazing purple and sulfur yellow roared out, she fell with deathly pale face into his arms. In the thick darkness, hands passed over her face and hair, and she heard hotly whispered words after the lordly commanding thunderclaps. He accepted her, as she hung on his shoulder like a light branch, limbs slack and trembling.

Her playmates found her in her bed the morning after the storm, stiff, lips open. Her shimmering eyes, as the feet of the girls sounded on the floorboards, insanely looked for something in her room and her friends' faces; she wanted to talk, but with a rough throaty sound she stuffed her scarf into her mouth and bit down hard. Or else she let out screams and regular protracted groans and threw herself from side to side. No one knew what had happened in the night, but they soon suspected that the terror of the storm had unsettled her soul.

And they tended her until she grew quiet, and let no one in to see the patient, even the friend who kept trying to get in. When the disheveled maiden had slowly collected herself and lay calmly, she finally said, furtively, pressing her head still more deeply into the pillow, as though trying to remember, and with an uncertain, questioning tone in her voice: Something was above their house last night. And she brooded intensely on her pillows again, looked irritably up at her companions and the mute objects in the room.

After some time, she was walking again, as before, with her friends through the damp short grass. But if before she was weighed down with a soft seriousness, now her movements slowed more and more until they were almost ceremonial. Her face brightened, dawn-like, illusionless. The first time she encountered her suitor, and her friends, noticing her surprised look, told her who he was, she looked into his entreating face for a long time and then calmly turned away, apparently looking for something in the green of the hanging leaves and in the smooth sky.

Now Mary was often found sitting outside in front of the main room, in the blue air. Her eyes grew more benevolent and pensive, and when the faithful friend stood next to her, she stroked his hand where it hung down beside her head, and her lips called him by the same name as before: Friend.

She throve and gradually turned into a ripe blossom. When she sat outside again, with the weak little child dandling on her knees, Joseph looked at her speechless as her eyes seemed to shine from within.

Mary, smiling, raised her tender face to the deep blue sky from which the dark hand of God had reached down for the virginal girl. She slightly opened her lips to the light in a kiss and long remained that way.

And then she lowered her peaceful, quiet head and chest half over the innocent little child lying held by her sweet-smelling hands on her lap, on her wide white robe, its folds shaded matte blue:

“I love you, I love you, you pledge from God.”

THE METAMORPHOSIS

Dedicated to Erna Reiss

THE EARLY years of the marriage between the Queen and the Prince Consort had passed without a moment's peace. But when the child, the heir to the throne, cried out in the old castle, the iron gates of the side entrance opened; the slim, pale Queen stood on the stones of the castle courtyard, swung herself into the saddle, and raced on her white horse, followed by a small cavalcade, through the crooked streets, between the huddled houses, across the market square, toward the yellow forests. Now the wild Queen burst once more through the mist-swallowed woodlands; picnics took place in the neighboring villages, masquerades and mummeries in the village halls where there was always a side room reserved, full of the glowing cheeks of her royal majesty, of the quavering of her brazen body and the vagaries of her mouth, snorting with laughter, of the veiled sweetness of her clipped voice—sumptuous celebrations, during which a soft, sick cavalier handed her lilacs, buried his face in her breast, and cried into her neck, with happiness, fear, and self-contempt. The Prince Consort too went about his solitary way again, like a monk. With sadly pursed lips his fat figure could be seen drifting through the halls; it was him, now frisky as a kitten, now sluggish and lazy, dripping with irony and self-mockery. He was taciturn; words effervesced from his mouth. At night he crept into the lady's wing, without a servant, and lay his aching head in the lap of a delicate black-haired maid of honor with shining eyes. Now no one saw the Queen's skirts askew; no hairpins she had lost were found in the corridors; the stairways no longer felt her tired, despondent feet; the pair, Queen and Prince Consort, walked through the dark halls next to each other, laughing. She wore a blue silk ribbon over her right ear; it hung down from her hair; her beloved had tied it there. A sweetbrier was stuck in the Prince's buttonhole, with a woman's two black hairs openly fluttering from it.

It was one afternoon, when after a cheerful discussion first the Queen and then the Prince fell silent, that the Queen slowly rose and walked wordlessly through the row of footmen out of the dining hall, and that the Prince stayed sitting with his eyes lowered, looking at his left hand, which had been lying next to her right, then shoved his silverware into a heap and went wordlessly to his room. The aides and ladies of the entourage quickly finished their meal. The Queen's chambers were locked; the Queen, it was said, had been standing by the window since her return and was not at all upset, she would open the door to her room soon. The redheaded privy councillor, a massive, gigantic lawyer with a straw-blond beard and kind eyes, grumbled that it would come to open warfare yet. The bony yellow face next to him, with pitch-black eyes and hair and a protruding lower lip—a hook-nosed little man, the court physician— crumpled up into a hopeful smile.

At the evening meal they were serious, they sat next to each other. Their faces revealed nothing, neither then nor at the social events of the next few days. They did not touch each other; they slid their chairs away from each other, had friendly conversations with those around them, their faces turned away; hardly a word did they exchange. Both of their voices sounded higher, and it seemed as though each of them was eavesdropping on the other.

It was a terrible moment when, on the third day, they ran into each other in the hall to the Queen's chambers, stopped, and shook hands, one morning, one gray morning. The Prince held her by the shoulder; they looked at each other for a long minute, looking away again and again. Each one trembled, something they otherwise did only with their eyes closed. "Go, go," she pleaded, and scurried back down the narrow corridor.

He was in his room. The fat Prince took a stool and sat down in front of his armoire. As he sighed and stretched, he knocked over a jardiniere holding an enormous vase. The water splashed onto his boots; he jerked away, unthinkingly shook his head, and sat down right next to the open armoire, rummaging around in it.

"Go, go"—that sounded like "Come, come." He held a blond wig in his hands and turned it around. Good, he thought, very good: a good wig. It didn't bother him at all, and that surprised him, made him strangely calm. He put it on. He made all his emotion stream into his scalp, into the wig, to savor it to the full in comfort. What else? A black coffee. No coffee, nothing to drink, nothing. He tiptoed over to the door, opened it, blocked off the whole hallway, disconnected the doorbell, stopped the pendulum of the clock hung high on the wall. Then looked around his room again, hummed through his teeth. Sat on

his taboret, deep in thought. He took out all the clothing, piece by piece, and felt it with his fingers. A doublet appealed to him and he draped it over his face; it smelled of lilacs. He put it on, tied on a thin cavalier's dagger, smoothed down his clothes in front of the mirror. "Come, come." He recoiled with a shudder, quietly opened the door, and crept down the corridor, humming through his teeth the whole time. In the middle he suddenly stopped, ran back to his room, looked through the shards on the floor for a bunch of red sweetbriers and laid them carefully over his left arm. He was crossing the threshold when a handle moved at the end of the hall. The door quietly opened; bright daylight fell slanting into the narrow hall from the Queen's chamber; slightly rustling footsteps approached, and the slender, lordly face of the Queen. She was wearing a black wig, its recalcitrant locks falling over her deathly pale cheeks; her courtly black silk dress clung tight to her body. They walked arm in arm, they strolled through the empty chambers, they walked silently through the mirror-smooth reception halls, the dining halls; they walked through the dark picture galleries. How freely he led her; how well their footsteps kept the same rhythm. She had turned her face away from him, the wild Queen. Only when their arms separated, at the Queen's door, did her cheeks start to burn, her breath race. He carefully laid down the bunch of carnations on her doorstep; the wild Queen took his warm hand and led him over the red flowers into her room. They stood before a pile of letters, pages, and volumes, with heads lowered; held each other's shoulders; touched their foreheads to each other's.

The door closed behind them; he sat on the taboret in front of her mirror, smoothed down his clothes. He wanted to take them off, but something resisted him; the sleeves seems to cling fast to his arms. He was shocked by his short blond hair; after he had put on his own uniform, he ran his hands caressingly across the strange garments he had spread out on the rug. He furtively kicked the mirror with the back of his heel, hammered nails into the bare wood, and hung the other man's outfit up on the wall, in clear view.

They sat together at the midday meal; now their glances were directed at each other. He sometimes ran his hand over his face, over his head, tugged at the high collar of his uniform, tried to hide his arms under the table; he felt like he was wearing a mask. The lordly Queen joked and teased him; all at once she laid down her silverware and tears fell from her eyes, she gnashed her teeth. They ran after her; she forbade any questions. After an hour, she lay quietly in bed, reading, and remarked only that the cries of her child disturbed her; they should house the child in another part of the castle. Tomorrow she would ask the court physician if staying by the seaside mightn't be better for the sickly child than the castle air. The old lady-in-waiting, sitting worried on a chair next to her, wanted to answer, shocked, with something, but the Queen repeated, looking very firmly at her, her question, whether she too didn't consider the sea air better than the mountains for the child. At which the old lady fidgeted on her chair, fiddled with her long gold chain, and, in a controlled voice, concurred.

But that night—it must have been almost ten o'clock—she stood up in outrage when the young Queen, who had sat down at the piano and tinkled a few notes, got up again and said that Count Hagen, the poet, should be ordered to come on the spot. She wanted to receive him here in her room, immediately and without delay, and alone, with no witnesses. Her young majesty screamed, slamming down the piano cover with a crash, that she would beat the old lady-in-waiting about the ears if she so much as dared to open her leathery mouth again, and would drive her out to the farmyard with the geese where she belonged. She said she would receive the cavalier alone, in her dark room, after she had lain down in bed, and she could report it to the cabinet of ministers and all the gout-ridden men in the country at once, by telephone, today, tomorrow, the next day, whenever she wanted. They stayed in the brightly lit music room without a word; the Queen raised the piano's black lid and played a hasty mazurka while the old lady-in-waiting held her lace handkerchief before her eyes. At eleven thirty, Count Hagen was announced. The Queen had received him in this room once before, it was two days before her wedding, late at night. Bowing, the pale cavalier had entered the dim room where only a dull candle on the piano was burning; the Queen was lying sunk in her soft armchair. Wedding presents were all over the carpet: vases, paintings, coffers. He had had eyes for nothing but the Queen, had offered her not a word as she held his hot head in her lap except: "You disgust me, you disgust me." He had shuddered without stopping, couldn't tear his gaze away from her deep-set eyes. She too had had eyes for nothing but the poet, and what she said to him, with kisses on his hands, fingers, mouth, cheeks, hair, with caresses and rocking, was one thing: "Farewell." Now the count pulled back the portiere; when he bowed deeply to the old lady, she wanted to retreat to the side room, with a desperate wringing of hands, but the Queen stared fixedly at her and said after a while that that wouldn't be necessary. She had the blond cavalier stand under the glittering chandelier, asked him about the results of the last hunt they had been on together, and whether he had already looked into his promotion in the regiment. Then she stood up, thanked him for his visit, and wished him good night. Asked the old lady with a laugh, hands folded in

her lap, how long she planned to stay sitting there, and when she was thinking she would send off all those telegrams. The lady shook her head.

It was quiet in the old castle until the morning when the Count, despite the Queen's orders, forced his way into her room. He wept before her, lying on the floor; she struck him in the face with her riding crop. Turning red and turning pale, trembling and gnashing her teeth, the Queen in her armchair listened to him as he implored her by all their bygone sweetness and tenderness; he reeled from the room with a bloody welt on his face and departed that afternoon. No one saw the Count for a week, then the Lord Chamberlain reported his disappearance to the Queen; she laughed scornfully; it was important, was it not, to change one's servants often. Was he still alive? When the Lord Chamberlain said yes, she broke out into an utterly wild laugh: "You see, Lord Chamberlain, how true it is what Schiller sings: 'O, Queen, but life is beautiful!'"

The delicate black-haired maid of honor no longer left her room. The yellow court physician treated her for a sudden attack of mental confusion and had her kept under watch. She had started a fire in her room one night when she had piled all her black clothes in the middle of the floor and set the pile alight with letters. The smoke had reached the Queen's chambers. After several weeks, she was more lucid; she was emaciated down to skin and bones. She submitted a request to the Queen for a trip home. Two days later she was found drowned in the pond of her paternal estate.

But the wild Queen and the fat Prince went strolling for hours in the spacious park behind the castle; the servant who followed them reported only that they rarely exchanged a word. She read every cry and every hope from his tired eyes, his face; she branded herself in his mind with a steadfast gaze, reduced him to humble tenderness before her. No bush was so quiet that its rustling did not disturb them as they listened in on each other, metamorphosing. One evening, as they walked up from the garden into the music room, a long mutter preceded them through the hallways. They glided through the halls as though wrapped in blankets. The double doors opened onto a little circle of people, and the Queen and Prince Consort stepped in across the reflective parquet, without masks, like ghosts, looking like the vanished pair, the Count and the Countess. The black wildness of the dead flashed out from the eyes of the severe Queen; a stooped sorrow lay over the melancholy calm of the Prince. The clean-shaven court chaplain sighed: The two were clearly suffering heavily from their past. The Mongoloid half-breed, the court physician, pursed his lips and lowered his chin onto his white shirt-front, fixing the pair with his eyes; he was shocked less by the strange way the past was working upon them than by the way they forgot the present, the moment. This made him seriously fear for both of their lives.

The pair had to sit next to each other at every moment, whisper to each other at every moment. The Queen neglected necessary government business and delegated important functions to the old men of her privy council; she canceled official receptions, did not appear at the court meals. One morning, she hurried down the narrow hall to his room in a snowy dress; the black blaze in her eyes had faded, she tore open the doors of his armoire with jittering hands and rummaged, rummaged, lying on the floor, among his things, while he consoled her. Murderous clutches of her fingers shredded the blond wig, crumpled and tore to pieces the doublet smelling of lilacs. She had an old, deep bite wound on her left upper arm. She stood up, took a bare Persian dagger from his table, sliced the scar out of her flesh, and pushed aside the cloth he wanted to use to stanch the gushing blood. She threw herself onto the floor, in convulsions; punched herself in the mouth, the breasts; pleaded: "You have to go there, you have to kill the child. It isn't mine, it is a living lie. If you care about me you must kill the child. I can't do it." Then they gave a start in despair, looked searchingly at each other, touched each other's faces gingerly with their fingers. His head was draped over her shoulder; she sobbed inconsolably.

Their tears flowed for many long days. By the time they next went back to the spacious park behind the castle, brightly colored fall had arrived without their having noticed. A thick veil had fallen over the faces of them both—the wild Queen, the melancholy Prince. A deep, unapproachable silence strode around them like an armored watchman. They set out on the hunt, they shot the crying partridges in the unkempt fields; laughing, glowing, they rode back alongside each other. But anyone who saw them riding home in the dark could tell that the same reticence hung over their faces as the glittering, spiderweb-thin garment that flowed over the mermaids' bodies, phosphorescing with the fall of night. One day, to the court's astonishment, they separated. The Prince Consort vanished without anyone knowing where he had gone. When he returned, after three days, he explained calmly that he had carried out a secret mission for the Queen; those in the inner circles were dismayed and upset beyond measure. A rumor started circulating in the country.

Until, one day, both of them left the country altogether. While the military stayed in their barracks in the capital, the police worked feverishly, and the cabinet met, a steamer put off from the coast, where it had been anchored for a week. Only a small team of men reverently greeted the foreign Queen and the

Prince, who went for walks on deck, both wrapped in white cloaks. The ship sailed for five days over the ocean, then dropped anchor near a small island; a boat put the foreign Queen and the Prince on land.

It was an island on whose shores only poor fishermen lived; there was a small village miles away, on the other coast. What happened between the young Queen and the melancholy Prince during that time, among the fisherfolk on the little island in the blue ocean, is difficult to tell in words—that they sat at the foot of the white chalk cliffs, or farther back, under the tall palm trees; that they barely let each other out of their sight for a minute; that the Queen, increasingly pale, only rarely let her sobbing head fall onto her chest, and the Prince held his forehead in his hand. Her gaze wandered back and forth between the sea and his countenance; when he didn't see the blue water, he didn't know if he was looking into her eyes or into himself. No matter how tightly they held each other, how deeply they kissed, the pair's melancholy, their common fear, was never-ending.

Sunsets blazed out across the smooth ocean. They sat beneath the cliffs for days in their white cloaks. Only now and then did they stroke each other's hands. Their gaze was fixed on the glittering, boundless water. Their quiet faces brightened. The sea breathed an immeasurable calm, which spread across the shore, absorbed into itself the beach, the pebbles, the mussel shells, the cliffs, and brushed against their foreheads.

Until, in the morning, the yellow sun shone over the little beach. Then the pebbles rattled, the delicate little stones rang. The purple cloak of the wild Queen dragged across the sand. She walked in solitude, in full regalia, slowly toward the blue sea. On her blond hair she wore the golden crown. From her severe shoulders fell the purple cloak with its wide brocade. Her slender face was smooth and sweet. Thus the young Queen walked alone in the shimmering air across the fine sand toward the blue sea. Two gray seagulls waddled in the sand behind her, following the Queen's every step.

The melancholy Prince climbed down a white bluff, bareheaded, in a blue velvet cloak; his black breeches were sheer satin, the buckles on his shoes silver-white. He carried a long scepter in his right hand.

The sparkling ocean beat with nary a wave as the pale young Queen and the quiet Prince marched into it from the island. The waves rocked; the wind caressed the happy sea with open palms. The gulls flew close to the coolly whispering surface.

Up on the glittering surface of the water, the ball of a scepter and a golden crown were swimming next to each other.

SHE WHO HELPED

IN NEW YORK, around the middle of the nineteenth century, the trial of a manufacturer named Grasso excited tremendous interest. People talked about the mysterious situation and its frightful surrounding circumstances for months. The war against the Southern states broke out before the sensation had died down, and, by the time the war ended a year and a half later, the memory of the incident had been extinguished. The details can now be reconstructed only in part. They have been overgrown by the weeds of mythic ideas; they make us marvel at the unbelievable things a person can encounter, and the smile on his lips with which he can pass them right by so that everything goes on just like before.

Toward the end of the fifties, on the outskirts of New York (the area has now been fully incorporated into the city), there was a flourishing funeral parlor. The owner, Grasso, had emigrated from Italy with his wife five years before. Having tried in vain to make a living as a hotelier, he then became a carpenter, making so much money that he acquired an old coffin warehouse. At the time, the city had barely 200,000 inhabitants. Before long, the Italian had gotten his hands on the entire burial industry—only a few isolated contracts, usually official ones, from civic or military hospitals, continued to go to other companies. His competitors rapidly went out of business. Not even the desperate defenses of the best-funded firms could resist Grasso; everything effortlessly came his way without his needing to make a fuss.

Only later, during the investigation of the case, did it come out that Grasso himself had played absolutely no role in the success of his business. The boom actually began, rather precisely, with the arrival at the firm of a young employee by the name of Mike Bondi. His origins were completely unknown, but people noticed that he spoke Italian with his boss. He was said to be around twenty years old when he was hired. But everyone was convinced that, in the fifteen years he spent with the firm, he had not aged a bit. Photographs later found in his possession, showing him arm in arm with Mr. Grasso, surprisingly proved that this person apparently stood motionless in the stream of time. Not a line in his delicate boyish face had grown deeper; his deep black hair still fell across a low white brow. Indeed, even his clothes—it is a little ridiculous to have to say it—seemed invulnerable to time: No one had ever seen him buy new ones; he always wore a black suit and a loose coat of fine material, with shiny buttons, in an old-fashioned cut, the kind people might have worn decades earlier. At the questioning during the trial, no one knew where Bondi spent his nights either; sometimes he seems to have stayed at the office, but usually he drove off to St. Floridan in a small wagon he owned, along the old country road, and completely disappeared for hours. But all this is uncertain, and actually belongs to the realm of legendary ideas I spoke of earlier.

Mike had a slim figure; he always wore a soft felt hat and carried a thin walking stick. His gait was soft and slinky, even sneaky. There is nothing to say about his eyes because no one had ever seen them. He always kept his eyelids lowered, and whenever anyone talked to him his eyeballs turned this way and that behind the delicate skin of his eyelids. His thin lips often tensed into a lovely, meek smile. His voice was indescribably gentle and melodious; this partly explains, perhaps, Mike's extraordinary influence. For what he said was simple, entirely businesslike; he rarely spoke, and when he did, apart from business matters, it was only about trees, roots, fields, and animals, things generally of little interest to city dwellers.

Good fortune went with him. It emerged that Mike Bondi used to take daily walks through the streets of New York followed by a tall Borzoi hound—an enormous white beast that strode along on its legs as noiselessly as Mike on his, and looked around with empty eyes. Mike Bondi would go up into the apartments of the sick and talk to them. No one resisted him; the sick would ask for him even before they summoned the priest or the doctor, and they were grateful to him for the minutes he filled with his meager words. He left these people calmer, freer of pain, but they all died, as came out in the inquiries at the trial—they would die after no more than a week, in great peace, without anyone being able to help them. Seeing him even once made people feel an almost inexplicable trust in him, and when their illness took a final turn for the worse, they asked for him as though in the grip of an inescapable addiction. He didn't come near their person, did not give them anything, did not touch them. All of this came out during the trial.

Mike Bondi was not friends with his boss's wife. Mrs. Grasso loved passionate men, but, jealous as all unfaithful women are, she was glad that her husband would rather spend time with Bondi than with girls. When coming home late at night, heart still pounding from a tender encounter, she would throw

her arms around her husband's neck when she saw him strolling down the dark streets arm in arm with his odd and quiet colleague.

One day, as spring drew to a close, the young wife of a legal adviser named Mr. Martin died suddenly in an apartment next door to Grasso's warehouse. The widower, left with two small children, could not bear to part from the dead woman, and, in the anxious night after her passing, the idea came to him that he should remove the body from the deathbed and lay it out on a bier with his own hands, as beautifully and sumptuously as he could. He grew animated and, around eleven o'clock, he got out of bed, got dressed, and went downstairs to see Grasso, with whom he was old friends. The warehouse doors were shut; a dull red light quavered through the cracks in the blinds and lay in thin lines on the pavement of the street. Mr. Martin opened the large front gates, stumbled across the pitch-black courtyard, and, through a side door that had been left ajar, reached the long corridor that led directly to the warehouse. The curtain to the warehouse rustled softly. His eyes had trouble adjusting. Against the walls, in the aisles, under low arches were stored the coffins. They stood open. They stood there not expectantly, not greedily—with a mysterious emptiness, sunk in on themselves, and only a few of them sighing and yearning. And in the dull red flicker of a lamp, Martin saw a movement back in the recess, heard whispering. Grasso was kneeling there in front of a coffin, out of which rose two white arms with lace sleeves sliding back down them. Grasso bent his head lower, pressed his face into a woman's flat chest. He murmured, "Bessie," and many other things, very softly; she answered, "Ernesto," laughing and crying at once; she had a very sweet voice.

Martin's heart was in his mouth; he stepped back, shocked to the depths of his being, and forgot his mission. Before he knew it he was lying in his bed. He dressed with the dawn and ran to see Mrs. Grasso, who was standing half dressed in her kitchen. Amazed at the early visit, she wrapped a shawl around her.

At first she didn't believe it, and she looked closely at her neighbor, thinking he must be deranged from the death of his young wife. But then she stopped her scrubbing, hurled the coffee grinder onto the stone floor, bit herself hard on the left forearm, and rummaged around in a drawer for a sharp kitchen knife that she stabbed into the wooden wall of the kitchen again and again, screaming. She wanted to know who the cheap tramp looked like, and whether Martin really had so little compassion that he couldn't even venture a guess. After some loud and unrestrained sobbing, she stood up, resolute, and said she would find everything out for herself that night. And with a self-assurance that left Martin speechless, she flung open the apartment door, called her husband in, and told him, while looking out the window and braiding her thick black hair, that Mr. Martin here had just told her that her mother in Starton, a suburb, was sick; she had to go see her at once, for two or three days. Then, without a word, the three sat down at the coffee table in the living room, where Mrs. Grasso repeatedly produced a violent shudder and one time dropped her cup on the floor. Mr. Grasso offered the opinion that that meant good luck for her mother.

That night, around ten, having spent the day at Martin's apartment taking care of his small children, she slipped across the dark street into the courtyard. She saw Grasso through the open window, sitting on the sofa alone in the lit living room and staring into space with a sad face, sunk in thought. The sluggish man moved his lips; his wrinkled face sagged; when he looked at the window, his swollen eyes were swimming with tears.

She lay in a narrow coffin right next to the door. Her teeth chattered; her hands shook so much that she could barely keep hold of the kitchen knife. A little before eleven, footsteps came down the corridor, soft and stealthy; the curtain rustled slightly. A little light flickered and she recognized Mike Bondi at once. She had seen him a thousand times—she knew his slightly stooped posture, the hair smoothed down over the low white forehead, the lowered eyelids. But now his noiseless steps filled her with horror. She felt faint. That was not how a human being walked. She had to press her whole arm against her mouth so as not to scream.

He put out the light with one finger as he passed her. She closed her eyes, and when she opened her lids she could no longer see Mike Bondi. But where he had just been walking, the darkness glowed white and a stooped skeleton slowly, noiselessly walked on. Death incarnate was shuffling by. She could still see the glow above a coffin he had leapt into. Then Mr. Grasso's heavy footsteps resounded through the vaults; he walked past his wife, who was struggling not to faint, and lit an oil lamp. Mrs. Grasso stood up, knife between her teeth, and followed him, clinging to pillars and walls at every step.

The big man dropped to his knees in front of the coffin into which the specter had leapt; two white arms rose up to meet him; recoiling, she saw the open coat and the flat, girlish chest into which a wrinkled wet face burrowed. She saw the girl's face of Mike Bondi rise up in silence; saw, shrinking back toward the door, how Mike pulled the broken man toward her with tender words of farewell, how they

embraced. She had the strength to drag herself back to the kitchen. For two hours she lay there, insensate. She spent the rest of the night at the police station, where they thought she was sick. Only on the following morning, when Mr. Martin the legal adviser was fetched, did two officers go to the apartment with her and arrest Grasso and Bondi, neither of whom resisted.

In the interrogation that followed, Grasso said absolutely nothing. A physical examination of Bondi showed that they were dealing with a twenty-year-old woman. They could not discover who she actually was. Only at the hearing that took place three weeks later in Grasso's vault did she talk. She said up front that no one would believe a word she said, then told them that her name was Bessie Bennet, from Senn Fair, near New York. She had lived there eighty years ago. When she was twenty, she was stricken with consumption and sent to the hospital. She was unspeakably loathe to part from life. She said she struggled against death in a way few others did, simply not willing to believe that she had to die just because of a damaged lung while she was still bursting with the desire to live. Then the unknown power, whose name she could not speak, she said, stood up from its throne and made her into a servant of Death. She was allowed to return, but not to the dance. She was allowed to kill, in the name of the merciful power, anyone who wanted to go; to take away their foolish fear of dying, ease and comfort them, and bring them to a speedy end. She was sent among mankind as one who helped and she brought a kind and peaceful death. She had fallen in love with Grasso, but it was good that they part now because otherwise she would soon have to die forever for him.

They confirmed that a Bessie Bennet had lived in Senn Fair about a hundred years before and died in the hospital there when she was twenty; her corpse, though, had conspicuously disappeared on the way to the autopsy. Two nurses were fired for negligence, despite their protestations of innocence, and all subsequent investigations proved fruitless.

When the judges laid out the findings at the second on-site hearing, they charged Bessie Bennet, a.k.a. Mike Bondi, with innumerable counts of murder by poison. They demanded that she show them without delay the powder she had used; if not, they would put her on the rack, a measure they would seek given the abominable nature of her crimes. They also commanded her to finally put aside her exaggerated modesty and look the judges in the face. Bessie, still in the black suit she always wore, smiled but her low brow reddened; she asked them to kindly untie her hands and release her. The judges, infuriated by this contempt, sent for the two bailiffs to have her whipped. The many spectators at the hearing were also furious at the devilish poisoner by this point; they stood up and started to push their way toward the shameless woman; the judges lost control of the crowd. Bessie stepped up before the judge once more and quietly, holding out her bound hands, said that she had no more time; they had to take off the ropes and let her go now.

Someone rudely hit her from behind on the shoulder; the mob swarmed over their prey. At just that moment, a sudden tightness was felt in every breast. Someone, wheezing, broke a window but the fresh air didn't help. A blue-lipped judge staggered to the door to the street, and collapsed. The ten judges sat on their chairs as though asleep. The old silence briefly reigned in the vault, interrupted by the echoing thuds of bodies. The audience rushed forward, clambering over the benches. The black-haired woman let her large, wide-open eyes roam around the room. She whistled angrily, piercingly, through her teeth. A man stumbled into the room from outside and grabbed her arm. She touched his hair and blew at his feet; a blaze of fire ignited his body and with a hoarse scream he staggered back and crashed to the ground.

The black-haired woman had bent over. Now, straightening up, touching her temples, standing in the middle of the wide vault, she burned in a black flame up to the ceiling and rose above the house in a smoking column of flame.

The heavy smoke suffocated people in all the nearby streets. The fire, more horrible than anyone had ever seen, lasted just two hours, incinerating roughly six hundred men, women, and children.

The whole neighborhood lay in rubble. No one came near the poisonous smoke for days. The judges and the accused had disappeared together. From then on, no one saw a kind and peaceful death walking down the streets followed by its enormous white Borzoi striding in equal silence, looking around with empty eyes. Instead, the sick in their deliriums apparently said that the unleashed white beast had leapt onto their chests, frightening them with its empty eyes, pressing its long fangs into their throats.

The legend of a kind and peaceful death, and of how she who helped it had been driven off, remained for many years alive in the land.

THE WRONG DOOR

AROUND four in the morning, the guard leaned his rifle against the high wall of the barracks courtyard, pulled the chain to extinguish the last gas lamp, and mumbled the short morning prayer, his fez pushed into his face and his forehead pointing toward Mecca. The vegetable carts clattered, the teams of donkeys pulling milk carts trotted down the gray lanes toward the sleeping city. The low windows of the officer's casino still cast a wide swath of light all the way to the row of trees on the other side of the street. No breath of the sharp morning wind just then rising penetrated into the long dining hall and the game room; the overheated gentlemen moved in a thick smoke, lay in club chairs with the jackets of their uniforms loosened. They crowded in threes and fours around a circular green table, flung their cards diagonally across the table with wild looks in their eyes, and then, after a few minutes of breathless silence, broke out in a hue and cry, grabbing each other by the shoulders and dancing around the room.

The evening was for the two Kyrias brothers, who were sitting with other hard drinkers at the head of a dining table utterly laid to waste, their honor goblets before them, reminiscing fondly about a Mediterranean voyage. The younger Kyrias, named Nick, dark-eyed like his brother but fiery, heavy-cheeked, with short bristly hair and a little mustache above his thick lips, bubbled over and babbled on in a soft high-pitched voice—a never-ending stream of things no one was listening to. Every now and then the elder Kyrias, full-bearded and hypochondriac, would let himself get carried away by his brother and would continue the story in a solemn, hesitant way, but give a start whenever he was about to get to the point, insecurely pick up a match and hold it between two fingers, stand up, smile, and leave it to Nick to finish. Nick told the group about the enormous sums the brothers had bet in Monte Carlo, and the tricks you had to use when gambling. He had kept his lucky talisman in his hand the whole time, or had secretly slipped off his boots under the table and played in his stocking feet; when these and many other things didn't help, he had defiantly sent an ugly old woman to get more money from the bank on a Friday morning. The flute of champagne fell from his fleshy hand and bubbles fizzed onto his creased shirtfront.

He was just beginning a story about how he had come to be so clever when First Lieutenant Irfen came out the gambling-room door and walked over and planted himself on a wicker chair across from Nick without a word. Nick had learned that, by placing small bets at first and observing the course of the game for about three hours, he could then start with a random combination that came to him on the spur of the moment and make little calculations of probability, and his chances would improve by approximately eighty percent. He took a white blotting pad from the bureau by the window and sketched out a chart on it with a piece of charcoal.

Straddling his wicker chair, the tall first lieutenant stared at him. His extraordinarily angular face was shaved smooth and his upper lip protruded strongly and quivered severely. Bald skull. Pepper-gray hair jutting out from the sides and back of his head; eyebrows and bridge of his nose coming together at sharp angles. Only drunkenness gave his otherwise roving eyes this rigid stare and made a patchy flush shine through the sallow gray of his cheeks. Irfen was seen in this casino only rarely. Instead—his superiors knew it as well as the newest recruits—he hung around the meanest dives in the city, and in the morning his comrades-in-arms often had to go looking for him in the worst bars. But an unusual brilliance and iron diligence meant his strict discipline was unrivaled. A strange incident about three years earlier had led to his being transferred from the capital to this provincial garrison. Irfen had been recommended for a high-ranking position when a major advance was supposed to take place during the spring maneuvers. On the beautiful March night before his division was due to move out, he caroused through the villages, drank himself blind in a farmers' pub, and ended the night with a notorious village witch, whose windows he had broken in first. The next morning, shortly before inspection, he turned up on the parade ground with a gray horse, unable to say how he had procured it and from whom. The commander rode past the officer sitting ramrod straight on his steed but with straw in his hair and with his left sleeve slashed open to the shoulder; the commander turned his horse around, rode back, and took a good look at him, amazed at first and then with an ironic smile. The next night, Irfen shot dead his own noble horse, forced his way into the commander's stall, and shot the commander's two valuable horses dead as well, after first maltreating the stable boy in vile fashion.

Reaching across the table, he took the blotting pad and charcoal pencil out of young Nick's hands and said, "Careful, comrade. Make sure your calculations are exactly right," then closed his eyes and scribbled with the broad piece of charcoal all over the table, smearing the red padding around the edge.

In response to the astonished, somewhat confused question asked by young Nick, who had leapt up at once, he broke out in a harsh, bleating laugh. Nick, standing bolt upright, snapped loudly back at him, but he met every challenge and demand that he explain himself with merely a mocking "Kismet—all is fate," so that the conversation took on a painful earnestness and was noticed in the side rooms. But the gray first lieutenant suddenly and very deliberately turned his chair around, swept the table in front of him clear with both arms, and lay across it, his head on his arms. He squinted his left eye, frowned with the left corner of his mouth, and his face took on a tense expression; he beat rhythmically against the tabletop with his left arm.

"Say whatever you want, Nick, do whatever you want. I say, if you have luck on your side you can march your division backward through a stubble field and not one of them will fall down. If you don't, then whatever you do, flog yourself, work yourself to death, it's no use. It just won't come, the luck. It doesn't have the key to your door. There it is. Don't even try; it will never darken your doorstep, never, even if you pull at the halter around its neck."

Nick's face jerked into a sneer. The lieutenant calmly went on: "Let me tell you something. Get me another jug of Greek wine. When I go to sleep tonight, I'll try it again. Yet again. Just because. But in my sleep. It's pointless to do it while you're awake, I know that. I'll ask in my sleep, you understand, what I want to know or don't want to know; I don't know what, and I'll wake up with the answer. Look here"—he had lain down with his upper body stretched across the whole table, his head on his left arm, and reached into the air with his other, open hand—"I'll go to sleep just the way I am here, I'll say Kismet, and consult the future, and it will answer my question." A blow of his fist made the table boom; he spoke with absolute determination. It was barely half an hour later that, still slumped on the table, he fell asleep.

He woke up at around two in the afternoon. As he walked through the hall without saying a word, young Nick teased him. Irfen remembered: He had not asked anything in his sleep and nothing had come to him. He went out into the city and came back at around eight, with a dark look on his face, to sit down and start drinking again.

The little circle started boozing; as the noise grew louder, Irfen sat sunk in thought. Until, at around ten, he suddenly stood up, smashed his glass to pieces on the table, and stood wordless and stock-still, his gaze directed at the window and the flame of the gas lamp outside.

"Stop, stop!" he screamed.

His eyes remained fixed on the gas lamp. It didn't flicker at all.

"Number Six, Number Six."

"What the devil is wrong with him?"

"Number Six I say."

"Fate," Nick whispered to his shocked brother.

"Which street, Irfen?" came a shout from the other end of the table.

"It's Number Six."

"Hey, Pera Street," the same voice roared. "That's where she lives!"

Irfen stood in silence. He whispered something. "Pera Street," he mechanically repeated, very soft. He sat down suddenly, very calm, drank down his glass in one gulp, and looked around.

The amazement in the casino lasted another moment, then someone laughed, and soon everyone was roaring with laughter. Nick leapt up: "Fate has spoken, comrades. Let us smoke out our Pythia." They crowded around the first lieutenant, pounded on the table like him, and shouted, "Bravo, prophet!"

They pestered him to tell them what he had asked. He ran his hand over his bare skull and muttered; he couldn't remember. The laughter went on and on.

Indifferently, pouring himself another glass from a jug of the strongest Greek wine, he said that he would leave in an hour, Fate had spoken, he could only receive the message. They should choose a witness; he laughed contentedly when Nick suggested himself and was chosen, and the young people started joking around wildly. They dressed up in women's clothes, paraded before him as the ladies of house Number Six, made the most horrific faces as they raised their coy veils, and roared, melodramatically and seductively, "Kismet, Kismet!"

A little before eleven, the fellows in the casino draped Irfen and Nick with their coats, buckled on their swords and pistols, handed them their fezzes. Those who had decided to remain behind until they returned formed two rows, and the pair marched out the door between the ranks of their honor guard, first Irfen, gaze completely cold, as though leaving the casino as usual, and behind him, swaggering, somewhat drunk, and highly pleased, Nick.

They took their first steps out into the brisk night air, Nick chatting away as he stumbled over the cobblestones; Irfen gave no answer. Then Nick stopped talking too. When he tried to give Irfen directions

with a movement of his hand at the first street corner, he noticed that Irfen had let his head sink down over his chest so that his fez almost fell off and clumps of hair hung forward over his face. At a streetlamp, it seemed to him that the first lieutenant was walking with his eyes shut tight, that a deep tension was pulling down the corners of his mouth, and that the same imperturbable certainty had appeared once again on his face.

The young man, already upset, now felt a paralyzing fear. When he stared again at the stony seriousness and doggedness striding alongside him, his hands sprang up with horror. “He is sinning” shot through his head; he wanted to stop, to run away, to tell someone what was happening. But he couldn’t stop. It was, after all, ridiculous too.

Irfen walked ahead of him with dragging feet and did not let him go. He walked with unbelievable steadiness alongside the buildings, in little, shuffling footsteps. They turned off the wide main street into long narrow Pera Street. Not a lamp was burning. Without raising his head, the lieutenant stopped in front of a little old one-story house. He had not looked up once to find the building. They stood there in front of the little door, without a sound, for almost half a minute. It was Number Six; it was, in fact, Number Six.

Irfen put his right hand on his forehead and said, without turning around, “Nick, I want to ask you to do something. Let us think of Allah for a moment; then we will have to forget Allah for a time.” He had already raised the metal doorknocker and let it fall against the wood. He stood there with his head sunk again, waiting.

Nick stepped up beside him. Inside, someone tromped down a staircase, stopped right behind the front door, and grabbed the handle; the door made a noise and then opened with a loud creak. It was an attendant, a bareheaded, gray-bearded Croat in shirtsleeves, who held up a giant hand lamp to see the uniforms and politely asked what the gentlemen wanted.

“Nothing,” Irfen answered, “let us up the stairs,” and he tried to push the Croat aside. Amazed, the Croat stationed himself one step farther up, legs spread, put his lamp down on the step next to him, looked at Nick again, and repeated his question. Meanwhile, the sound of a man’s thin scolding voice came from upstairs; a bald, feeble, bent-over little old man in a dressing gown came hobbling down the stairs, clutched his tassels together on catching sight of the two officers, and asked, very seriously, but still gruff, who had sent them and to whom they wished to speak.

“No one sent me,” Irfen snapped back, “there’s someone in this house I have to see.” The little man stood up straight, looked searchingly into the motionless face of the haggard officer, and said, in a very uncertain, embarrassed voice, “Gentlemen, perhaps you have made a mistake about the street, or the building. I don’t know. There are only the ladies sleeping upstairs; no one else lives here; I can’t let anyone in now.”

“Your ladies’ sleep is certainly important, but I have a mission here that cannot be delayed.”

The Croat and his master exchanged quick looks. “You really mean Number Six, gentlemen? Six Pera Street? There must be a misunderstanding.”

“Let me upstairs, sir,” Irfen insisted, “don’t worry about my business. If there’s nothing upstairs then I’m in the wrong. Don’t talk— let me up!”

“I can’t let you into the ladies’ bedroom. I ask you to please leave this house!”

“I won’t lay a finger on anything of yours.”

“Please, go away. I will call the authorities, sir.”

“Even if you alert the whole garrison, I’m going upstairs. Nick, stay here; you can help me now.”

He pushed past the old man to the banister; the man said, “Please be so kind as to take your hand from the banister, and don’t touch me.”

The Croat put the lamp behind him on a higher step and stood right in front of Irfen, laying an iron hand on Irfen’s arm.

“Nick, do me a favor and take care of these people. If I’m wrong, I’m wrong. But you should see for yourself.”

Hurried footsteps were heard upstairs, a rustling of clothes; a woman’s frightened voice cried, “Let him come up, for God’s sake, Kari.” But the Croat, trembling with rage, had given Irfen’s chest a sudden shove and sent him flying out the door, then slammed it shut behind him. Irfen braced himself, first pounded on the flimsy door with both fists, then, with two kicks, broke it in and sent pieces of wood and splinters flying, which hit the screaming people inside. At just that moment, Mr. Kastelli raised his arm high and bent double; the first lieutenant’s sharp sword swished over his head through the opening; and simultaneously a shot rang out down the stairs from the Croat’s revolver, followed by two more shots in quick succession. Outside, Irfen stretched his tall body up high and threw his arms into the air, fell backward onto the sidewalk, pulled himself to his feet again, ran diagonally across to the other side of

the dark street leaving his fez lying behind him, pressed against the wall for another moment, and then with a dull thud fell forward onto his face. Nick, hit in the arm, was already kneeling at his side, trying to turn him over. When he turned Irfen's head, he saw a small bullet hole in the forehead and the unchanged face of a gray man who had squinted his left eye shut, drawn down the left corner of his mouth, just laid down across a messy table, and said with a wave of the arm and imperturbable certainty, "Kismet."

Mr. Kastelli and his ladies followed the coffin at the funeral. There were three older ladies, relatives of the paterfamilias, and a gentleman who had been staying with him for a few days while passing through town. In the casino, whenever the case came up in conversation, they said what happened could essentially have been predicted in advance.

THE MURDER OF A BUTTERCUP

AT FIRST, the gentleman in black had counted his footsteps, one, two, three, up to hundred and back, as he climbed the wide spruce-lined path to St. Ottilien, and swung his hips to the right and the left with every movement, so violently that he sometimes stumbled; then he forgot.

His light brown eyes, bulging in friendly fashion, stared at the ground sliding away under his feet, and his arms swung from his shoulders, making his white cuffs slip down halfway over his hands. When a yellow-red evening light between the tree trunks made him blink, he flinched his head, his hands made quick disgusted defensive movements. The thin walking stick in his right hand waved back and forth above the grass and flowers at the side of the road and disported with the blossoms.

As the gentleman continued calm and heedless on his way, it got caught in the sparse weeds. The serious gentleman did not stop, he only pulled lightly on the handle as he kept walking, then turned back to look, wounded, when his arm wouldn't move, yanked in vain at first, then successfully freed the stick with both fists and, breathless, with two quick glances at the stick and the meadow, walked back so that the gold chain on his black vest jumped.

The fat man stood there a moment, beside himself. His stiff hat was pushed back over his neck. He fixed his eyes on the overgrown flowers, only to lunge at them with stick upraised and face blood-red and beat wildly at the silent growth. Blows whipped left and right. Stems and leaves flew across the path.

Puffing out air, eyes flashing, the gentleman walked on. The trees strode quickly past him; the gentleman was not paying attention to anything. He had an upturned nose and a flat, beardless face, an elderly child's face with a sweet little mouth.

At a sharp curve in the uphill path, he had to pay attention. As he marched more calmly and irritably wiped the sweat from his nose with his hand, he felt that his face was totally contorted, that his chest was panting violently. The thought that someone might see him, maybe one of his business colleagues or a lady, terrified him. He rubbed his face and convinced himself with a furtive movement of the hand that it was smooth.

He walked calmly. Why was he panting? He smiled, embarrassed. He had leapt at the flowers and slaughtered them with his walking stick, yes, struck with the same violent but well-aimed movements of the hand that he was accustomed to use to strike his apprentices when they did not deftly enough catch the flies in the office and present them to him, sorted by size.

The serious man shook his head many times at the strange occurrence. "The city is bad for the nerves. The city makes me nervous." He swayed his hips pensively, took off his stiff English hat, and fanned the fir-scented air onto his tufts of hair.

After a short while he was once again counting his steps, one, two, three. One foot stepped ahead of the other, arms swung from his shoulders. Suddenly Herr Michael Fischer saw, as his eyes roamed emptily over the side of the road, a stocky figure, himself, stepping back from the grass, lunging at the flowers, and slicing a buttercup's head clean off. What had earlier happened on the dark path was palpable before him. This flower here was exactly like the other one, down to the last detail. This one called to his eye, his hand, his stick. His arm went up, the stick whipped down, whish, off flew the head. The head somersaulted into the air and disappeared into the grass. The businessman's heart beat wildly. Now the detached plant head sank awkwardly down and burrowed into the grass. Deeper, ever deeper, down through the layer of grass into the soil. Now it started to speed down into the center of the earth where no hands could hold it anymore. And from above, from the stump of the body, it was dripping, white blood spurted from the neck and ran down into the hole, at first only a little, like the saliva running out of the corner of a paralyzed man's mouth, then in a thick current, slimy, with a yellow froth, it ran at Herr Michael, who tried in vain to get away, hopped to the left, hopped to the right, who tried to jump across it, whose feet it was already surging and beating against like the sea.

Herr Michael mechanically put the hat back on his sweat-covered head and pressed his hands, holding the stick, to his chest. "What's happened?" he asked after a while. "I'm not drunk. The head can't fall, it has to still be there, still be there in the grass. I am convinced that it is right now lying there calmly in the grass. And the blood. . . . I don't recall this flower, I have absolutely no idea about anything."

He was amazed at himself, disturbed, suspicious. Everything in him was fixated on this wild excitement, brooded aghast on the flower, the fallen head, the bleeding stem. He was still jumping over the slimy flow. What if someone saw him, one of his business colleagues or a lady.

He drew himself up, Herr Michael Fischer, clutching the stick with his right hand. He glanced at his

jacket and his posture stiffened. He'd soon prevail against wayward thoughts. Self-mastery. He, the boss, would energetically bring this disobedience under control. This population had to be decisively confronted. "Who is serving whom here? We are not accustomed to such behavior in my firm. Valet, throw the rascal out!" He stood and waved the little stick around in the air. Herr Fischer had put a cool, repudiating look on his face; he would just have to see about that. His superiority went so far as to make him ridicule his timidity, up there on the wide paved road. How silly it would be if a red poster were put up on all the placard-pillars in Freiburg tomorrow morning: "Wanted for the murder of an adult buttercup, on the path from Immenthal to St. Ottilien, between the hours of 7 and 9 p.m. The suspect is" etc. So scoffed the flabby gentleman in black, enjoying the cool evening air. Down below the little girls, the couples, would find what his hand had wrought. There would be screams and cries, horrified hurryings home. The police would think about him, the murderer, cleverly laughing up his sleeve. Herr Michael shivered wildly at his own daring—he never would have thought he was so depraved. Down below, though, for the whole city to see, lay proof of his energy and vigor.

The shaft sticking straight up into the air, white blood oozing out of its neck.

Herr Michael stuck out his hands, a little defensively.

It congeals on top, all thick and sticky, making the ants get stuck.

Herr Michael rubbed his temples and loudly exhaled.

And next to it in the grass, the head rots. It gets squished, dissolved by the rain, putrefied. It turns into a yellow stinking sludge, greenish, yellowish, shimmery, slimy like vomit. It picks itself up, alive, runs toward him, right at Herr Michael, it wants to drown him, the current slaps against his body, spurts and splatters at his nose. He jumps, hopping on his tiptoes.

The sensitive gentleman recoiled. He felt a sickening taste in his mouth. He was too disgusted to swallow, he couldn't stop spitting. He tripped and stumbled, hopped anxiously on, with blue pale lips.

"I refuse, I most firmly refuse, to enter into any relationship whatsoever with your firm."

He pressed his handkerchief to his nose. He had to get rid of the head, cover up the stem, stamp it out, bury it. The forest reeked of plant corpse. The odor accompanied Herr Michael and grew more and more intense. Someone needed to plant another flower in that place, sweet-smelling, a carnation garden. Get rid of the cadaver in the middle of the forest. Rid of it.

The moment when Herr Fischer wanted to stop, the thought ran through his head that it was ridiculous to turn back, more than ridiculous. What did he care about that buttercup? Bitter rage flared up within him at the thought that he had almost been caught off guard. He hadn't controlled his temper. He bit his index finger: "Careful, you, I'm telling you, look out you damned villain." At the same time, gigantic fear ambushed him from behind.

The scowling fat gentleman looked nervously around, reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a pocketknife, and flipped it open.

Meanwhile his feet walked on. His feet started to hurt. So now they too were trying to set themselves up as master; their willful pushing onward appalled him. He'd soon tame these little ponies. They'd get a taste of him. One hard jab in the flanks would break them in a hurry. They continued to carry him forward. It almost looked like he was running away from the scene of the murder. People mustn't think that. A rustle of birds, a distant whimper, filled the air and rose up from below. "Stop, stop!" he screamed at his feet. Then he plunged the knife into a tree.

He hugged the trunk with both arms and rubbed his cheeks against the bark. His hands fingered the air as though kneading something. "We're not going to Canossa." With anxiously furrowed brow the deathly pale gentleman studied the cracks in the tree, hunched his back as though something was about to jump on him from behind. He heard the telegraph connection between him and the scene of the crime clatter again and again, even though he was trying to tangle and crush the wires with kicks. He tried to conceal from himself that his rage was already paralyzed, that a gentle lasciviousness was flaring up inside him, a wanton desire to relent. Deep down, all the way back, he lusted for the flower and the murder scene.

Herr Michael bounced up and down with his knees, desperate to do something, sniffed the air, listened in every direction, anxiously whispered, "I only want to bury the head, that's all. Then everything'll be fine. Quick, please, please." He shut his eyes unhappily, turned apparently inadvertently on his heels. Then he strolled, as though nothing had happened, straight downhill, in a nonchalant saunter, with a soft whistle that he infused with a careless tone, caressing the tree trunks along the path with his palms while exhaling, liberated. He smiled as he walked, and his little maw became round like a hole. He loudly sang a song that suddenly came to him: "The little bunny lay in the ditch, fast asleep."[1] He imitated his earlier prancing, hip-swaying, arm-swinging. He had guiltily shoved the little stick far up into his sleeve. Sometimes, at bends in the road, he hurriedly snuck back to see if anyone was watching him.

Maybe she was still alive. Yes, right, how did he know she was dead? The thought darted into his head

that he could heal the wounded thing if he propped her up with a little splint of wood and wrapped a bandage or something around her head and stem. He started to walk faster, forgot his posture, ran. Suddenly he was trembling with anticipation. And he crashed full-speed into a fallen tree trunk at a bend in the road, hitting his chest and chin so that he groaned out loud. When he picked himself up, he forgot his hat in the grass; the shattered stick shredded his sleeve from inside; he didn't notice. Hoho! They wanted to stop him? Nothing would stop him, he would find her yet. He clambered back down. Where was the place? He had to find it. If only he could call the flower. But what was her name? He didn't even know her name. Ellen? Maybe her name was Ellen, yes, definitely Ellen. He whispered into the grass, he bent over to push the flowers aside.

"Is Ellen here? Where's Ellen? Well? She's hurt, a head injury, a little below the head actually. Maybe you haven't heard. I want to help her—I'm a doctor, a good Samaritan. So, where is she? You can trust me, don't worry."

But how was he supposed to recognize her, she whom he had broken apart? Maybe he was just then holding her in his hand, maybe she was sighing her last breath right next to him.

That must not be.

He bellowed, "Surrender her! Don't make me suffer, you dogs. I'm a Samaritan. Don't you know German?"

He stretched out on the ground, searched, eventually rummaged blindly around in the grass, crumpled up and clawed at the flowers, while his mouth hung open and his eyes looking straight ahead flickered. He pounded the ground before him for a long time.

"Surrender. Conditions must be set. Preliminaries. The doctor has a right to see the patient. The law will have to be brought in."

The trees stood all around, deep black in the gray air, along the path and everywhere. It was also too late; the head was surely dried up by now. The thought of death with its finality appalled him and shook his shoulders.

The black round figure stood up from the grass and staggered downhill along the edge of the path.

She was dead. By his hand.

He sighed and rubbed his brow, brooding.

They would come at him from all sides. And let them, he didn't care anymore. It was all the same to him. They would cut off his head, tear off his ears, place his hands on burning coals. There was nothing more he could do. He knew it would all be fun and games for them, but he would not make a sound to give the vicious hangman's henchmen any satisfaction. They had no right to punish him; they were depraved themselves. Yes, he had killed the flower, and it was absolutely none of their business, he had every right to do it and would defend that right against every last one of them. He had the right to kill flowers and felt no need to justify himself further. As many flowers as he wanted, he could kill them all, in a radius of a thousand miles, north, south, west, east, never mind their smirks. And if they kept laughing like that he would go for their throats.

He stopped, looked poisonously into the heavy darkness of the firs. His lips were filled to bursting with blood. Then he hurried on.

He should probably offer his sympathies here in the forest to the sisters of the deceased. He pointed out that the tragedy had occurred without his having done practically anything, reminded them of the sad exhaustion he was suffering under as he ascended. And the heat. In any case, when it came right down to it he didn't care about buttercups.

He desperately shrugged his shoulders again. "What else will they do to me?" He rubbed his cheeks with his dirty fingers; he couldn't get his bearings.

What did all this mean—for God's sake, what was he doing here?!

He wanted to sneak away on the shortest path, diagonally down through the trees, and reflect on everything perfectly clearly and calmly. Slowly, point by point.

So as not to slip on the smooth ground, he feels his way from tree to tree. The flower, he thinks cunningly, can just stay on the path where it is. There are enough dead weeds like that in the world.

Horror seizes him, though, when he sees a round pale light drop of resin coming out of a trunk he touches; the tree is crying. Fleeing in the dark down a footpath, he soon realizes that the road is getting strangely narrow, as though the forest is trying to lure him into a trap. The trees are gathering to judge him.

He has to get out.

Again he runs hard into a low fir; it knocks him down with its raised hands. Then he violently forges ahead, blood streaming down over his face. He spits, flails around, kicks the trees with loud screams, skids downhill sitting and rolling, finally runs headlong down the last hillside at the edge of the forest

toward the lights of the village, his shredded frock coat thrown over his head, while the mountain hisses threateningly behind him, shaking its fists, and a cracking and snapping of trees can be heard everywhere, running after him, scolding him.

The fat gentleman leaned motionless against the gas lamp in front of the small village church. He was hatless; there were pine needles and black soil all over his disheveled shock of hair, which he did not shake out. He was breathing heavy. As warm blood ran down the ridge of his nose and dripped onto his boots, he slowly lifted a coattail with both hands and pressed it against his face. Then he raised his hands to the light and marveled at the fat blue veins on the backs of his hands. He rubbed the thick nodules and could not rub them off. As the electric streetcar burst into song and howls he staggered off, down narrow alleys, toward home.

Now he was sitting stupidly in his bedroom and he said out loud, “Here I sit, here I sit,” and looked desperately around the room. He paced up and down, pulled his things out and hid them in a corner of the wardrobe. He put on a different black suit and read the newspaper on his chaise longue. He crumpled it as he read; something had happened, something had happened. And he felt it full force the next day, sitting at his desk. He was petrified, he could not swear, and a strange silence enveloped him everywhere he went.

He frantically told himself it must have all been a dream—but the scratches on his forehead were real. In that case, some unbelievable things must be true. The trees had lashed out at him, a wail had gone up for the dead creature. He sat there sunk in thought and, to the amazement of his staff, did not even bother about the buzzing flies. Then, glowering darkly, he bullied the apprentices, neglected his work, and paced back and forth. Several times they saw him beat the table with his fist, puff out his cheeks, scream that he would clean house here in the company once and for all. They’d see. Nobody would make a fool out of him, nobody.

When he was doing the books the next morning, though, something unexpectedly insisted that he credit ten marks to the buttercup. He was startled, fell into bitter brooding about his powerlessness, and asked his authorized signatory to do the rest of the accounts. That afternoon, in icy silence, he personally put the money in a special box; he was even made to set up a private account for her; he was tired, he wanted his peace. Soon it impelled him to make offerings to her from his food and drink. Every day a little saucer was set out for her next to Herr Michael’s place. The housekeeper had thrown up her hands when he had demanded this extra place setting, but the gentleman had broken out in an unprecedented rage and forbidden any criticism.

He atoned, atoned for his mysterious guilt. He conducted church services with the buttercup, and the placid businessman now claimed that everyone had their own religion, we all have to adopt our own personal stance toward God the inexpressible. There are things that not everyone can understand. A suffering look had come over his serious little monkey face; his corpulence, too, had gone down, his eyes sat deep in his skull. The flower watched over his actions like a conscience, rigorously, from the largest acts to the smallest everyday behavior.

During that time the sun often shone on the city, the cathedral, the castle hill, shone with all the fullness of life. Then, one morning, the hardened man burst into tears at his window for the first time since his childhood. Cried all of a sudden, his heart almost breaking. All this beauty stolen from him, by Ellen, the accursed flower—with everything beautiful in the world she accused him. The sunshine gave light but she did not see it; she could not breathe the scent of the white jasmine. No one would come visit the site of her pitiful death, none would say a prayer there: So she had every right to throw it all in his face, however ridiculous it was and however he wrung his hands. It is all denied her now: the moonlight, the bridal bliss of summer, the peaceful coexistence with the cuckoo, the people strolling, the baby carriages. He pressed his lips together; when people went to climb that mountain he wanted to hold them back. Let the world go under with a sigh, as long as it shut the flower’s trap. He went so far as to contemplate suicide—anything to still the torment at last.

In the meantime he treated her bitterly, contemptuously, shoved her against the wall with a running start. He betrayed her in little things: knocked over her saucer with a quick push, as though by accident; made math errors to her disadvantage; sometimes acted devious toward her, the way he did to competitors. On the anniversary of her death he pretended he didn’t remember anything. Only when she seemed to insist more urgently on a silent ceremony did he devote half a day to her memory.

One time, at a social gathering, the question went around about people’s favorite dishes. When they asked Herr Michael what he most liked to eat, he replied coldly and deliberately, “Buttercup. Buttercups are my favorite food.” Everyone broke out in laughter, but Herr Michael huddled in his chair, teeth clenched, listened to them laugh and savored the buttercup’s rage. He felt like a monstrous dragon that calmly gulped down living beings; he thought about wild Japanese things, hara-kiri. Even as he secretly

awaited a harsh punishment from her.

He waged this guerrilla war with her uninterruptedly; he uninterruptedly swung back and forth between deathly anguish and rapture; he anxiously feasted on the furious screams he sometimes thought he heard her make. Daily he devised new traps; he often retreated from his office to his room, in a state of great excitement, to hatch his plans undisturbed. And so the war raged on in secret, and no one knew what it was about.

The flower was his, was part of the comfort of his life. He thought back in amazement to the time when he had lived without the flower. Now he often went for walks to St. Ottilien through the forest, with a defiant expression on his face. And one sunny evening, while he was relaxing on a fallen tree trunk, the thought flashed into his mind: Here, exactly where he was sitting, his buttercup, Ellen, had once stood. It must have been right here. Wistful, timid reverence gripped the fat gentleman. The turns everything had taken, from that evening to this! Rapt in thought, he let his kind, slightly darkened eyes roam across the weeds, Ellen's sisters, maybe her daughters. After he had mused for a long time, his smooth face twitched mischievously. Oh, his dear little flower had it coming now. If he dug up a buttercup, a daughter of the dead one, planted it at home, and lavished tender loving care on her, then the old flower would have a young rival. Yes, now that he thought about it, he could expiate the death of the old one completely. For he was saving the life of this flower and thus making up for the death of her mother; otherwise this daughter would just rot and die here, most likely. Oh, he would make the old one mad, leaving her out in the cold like that. The businessman, conversant as he was with the law, recalled a paragraph on compensation for damages. He dug out a little plant nearby with his pocketknife, carried it carefully home in his bare hands, and planted it in a gilded porcelain pot that he placed on a mosaic side table in his bedroom. He wrote in charcoal on the bottom of the pot: "§2043 par. 5."

Every day the happy man watered the plant with spiteful devotion and sacrificed the dead one, Ellen. She was legally compelled, on pain of possible police measures, to resign herself; she received no further dishes, no food, no money. Often, lying on the sofa, he thought he heard her whimpers, her long, drawn-out groans. Herr Michael's self-confidence grew in unforeseen ways. He sometimes practically had fits of megalomania. Never had his life passed so cheerfully.

One evening, after he had contentedly strolled back from his office to the apartment, his housekeeper told him, calmly, right at the door, that she had knocked over the little table while cleaning up and the pot had broken. She had thrown the plant, that nasty piece of garbage, into the trash with all the shards. The matter-of-fact, slightly contemptuous tone in which this person reported the accident made it clear that she was in full sympathy with the proceedings.

Rotund Herr Michael slammed the front door shut, clapped his stubby hands, loudly squeaked with happiness, and lifted the startled female into the air by her hips, as high as his strength and the length of her body permitted. Then he went sashaying down the hall and into his bedroom, eyes flashing, unutterably excited; he panted heavily, stomped his legs, his lips twitched.

No one could say anything against him; he had not wished for the death of this flower with a single, most secret thought, not granted it the smallest fingertip of a thought. The old one, the mother-in-law, could curse and rail and say whatever she wanted. He had nothing to do with her anymore. They were divorced. He was free of the whole buttercup brood now. Law and Fortune and Justice were on his side. There could be no doubt.

He had duped the forest.

He wanted to set out for St. Ottilien at once, climb up into that grumbling, stupid forest. In his mind he was already swinging his little black walking stick. Flowers, polliwogs, toads too—look out. He could murder as many as he wanted. He didn't give a damn about any and all buttercups.

The fat businessman Herr Michael Fischer, irreproachably dressed, rolled from side to side with laughter and schadenfreude on his chaise longue.

Then he leapt up, shoved his hat onto his head, and stormed past the astonished housekeeper, out of the house, onto the street.

Laughing and snorting loudly is how he disappeared into the darkness of the mountain forest.

[1] A common children's rhyme. The next lines are: "Poor little bunny, are you sick, why can't you hop? / Hop, bunny, hop, bunny, hop!"—Trans.

BLUEBEARD THE KNIGHT

PAST THE thin row of birch trees edging the town to the north, a rolling plain extended to the sea, sparsely filled with low pines and shrubbery. Not a single path ran from the gap in the city walls to the shore, barely two hours away; a narrow road led to the water in a wide arc skirting around the wasteland. There were bogs in many declivities in the plain, black and starchy like glue; rats and toads lived there; a jay often shot through the thick air and caught a slug or snail.

Where the row of hills rose steepest, square and shapeless blocks of stone towered sharply up, the remnants of eroded bluffs. The ocean had once covered the land; now the plain lay there, haggard and wintry. Sea and earth both turned away from it.

This area had, many years ago, come into the possession of one Baron Paolo di Selvi in a strange way. The baron, returning from a trip around the world, had steered through the sound into these waters to visit the town and see the father of his first officer, who had succumbed to blackwater fever on the other side of the equator. He came on land, dreamily, sparkling with good spirits and confident of his ability to conquer. He walked broad-shouldered over the plank with the lightly bowed legs of a horseman. The wind whistled sharply that morning and knocked the captain's cap he was wearing at a tilt into the water in one clean blow, so that he stood there bare-headed, laughing among his people, who were appalled by the bad omen. His eyes were set somewhat at a slant, close to his nose, which was small and blunt and with the bridge set far back. His bright light-gray eyes didn't go with his girlishly soft mouth, his gentle voice. He followed the long detour to town riding on a black stallion behind a brace of mules; they were hauling two chests to the old man he was looking for, one with the first officer's keepsakes and all his belongings, the other filled with Japanese silk, Indian pearls and jewels, Siberian fur. He stayed in the town barely two hours, then rode back alone at a trot, whistling and laughing—rode, not knowing the region, the short way through the plain. Nothing is known of the events that took place on the plain that day. The baron must have dismounted from his horse right at the entrance to the area and made his way alone through the sand and mire. At dawn the next morning they found the missing man lying unconscious on the bluff, stretched out on his back, covered all over with seaweed and mud, his face strangely swollen, hot, and blistered, as though burned, and with the skin on his right hand and forearm coming off in patches too. They laid him on a bier unconscious and carried him diagonally across the wasteland to the nearest road, where they requisitioned a hay wagon and drove back to town. The wounded surfaces healed in a week. The baron did not know what had happened to him. All the townsmen knew was that the nurses said that his eyes took on a horrified, suffering look when night approached, that he raised his right arm into the air as though to defend himself and whimpered inconsolably. When he had fully recovered, he gave his yacht as a present to his first helmsman, said goodbye to his crew, and moved to the town.

At first he lived in a house to the south of the town, surrounded by fields. His neighbors were the many songbirds; he cultivated no dealings with anyone. After a few months, he moved into a very old apartment by the city walls, with a view of a wide stretch of the misty heath. He strolled or sat on the city walls, an entirely changed, unapproachable man, or rode slowly along the road to the sea. It was after almost a year that he walked through the streets of town early one morning, asked at the marketplace to see a master builder, and commissioned him, with a few short words, to build a residence on the heath, at its highest point, near the bluff. The builder did not need to hurry, he said, crossing his arms; it should be a castle, comfortable and spacious, festively decorated, for in six months he intended to take a wife.

So the road builders set off across the heath and stamped down a safe side path from the road to the bluff. The masons drove up noisily; they leveled the hill, laid the foundation, and built, into cliffs that reached up to the second floor and freely projected into the rooms, a wide, elongated, gray limestone building with colorful stained-glass windows and delicate towers. In the middle of the wasteland there rose the tower, the laughter of the builders, the shaking of the townsfolk's heads.

Barely a month after the walls were covered and the rooms were filled with valuable objects, the baron brought into his castle a young woman from abroad. She attended the theater in town once, this Portuguese woman, a brunette childlike creature who never let go of her husband's arm; he laughed again the way he had before and enchanted everyone. They danced in the Bürgersaal that night. The baron pursed his lips and whistled during the dance; he stroked his brown beard and scoffingly showed off the burn scars on his right hand. The second time anyone heard about the Portuguese woman was a

week later, when a messenger came racing on horseback from the castle, beat down the doctor's door, and dragged him out to the heath to the young woman's body. She lay in the dark hallway outside her room in her nightdress, with a purplish-red face. Next to her, the candle she had probably been holding when she fell out the door was still burning. The baron followed the doctor with numb eyes; he answered no questions, his face was expressionless. From the words of a sobbing lady-in-waiting the doctor learned of an old heart condition the Portuguese woman had had; he buttoned up his fur coat; she had succumbed to a blood clot in the lung.

Three weeks later the baron appeared in town again; they invited him to events and parties. He rode into town more and more often, went hunting, took part in jousts and races, drank wine at night, and told stories about his travels and adventures. For a long time he was seen merry, enthusiastic, dreamy, with the soldiers and seamen of the town; one March day he went out to sea again, with two of them. After about six months a letter from him reached the steward of his castle, saying that the bedchambers should be lined in green and green runners laid down, and that orchids should be set out in the lady's bedroom.

About eight months after his departure, he returned. Again he was bringing a young foreigner to his castle. This one no townsmen saw. One morning she lay in a black riding habit, a veil covering her proud white face and riding crop in her hand, in the castle courtyard, dead.

The people, the mariners, the workers who lived outside of town started to whisper when the sinister baron rode past in his black leather cloak; children screamed when they saw him, threw little stones at him as he passed, shot his stallion using slingshots.

An alderman's daughter, a slim girl with light blond hair, saw him out her window. When the men spoke in grim wrath of the black knight's lot, tears came to her dove-gray eyes; she cried over him in her room and went to his castle one day and became his wife. All the frightened pleas of her family could not prevent it. A riotous crowd of men and women swarmed along the dark path to the castle when, before even a month had passed, the sweet creature's body was found one night in a gap in the city walls. The police surrounded the castle as a precaution; the baron was arrested. The court had the first two wives exhumed and ordered a detailed chemical analysis of the three corpses for poison. The results were negative. The baron was freed. The people impotently reached out their hands after him, wanting to tear him to pieces, as he rode back out onto the heath, slowly, with a mocking laugh, a revolver in his right hand.

From that point on he completely avoided the town. He lived alone on the heath; only his riches kept the staff and servants from leaving the castle.

Then one day a small yacht docked outside of town. A silver horn rang out across the heath; in a carriage drawn by a pair of white horses, Miss Ilsebill rode down the smooth road to town. She checked into the inn on the market square. She asked the landlord about Baron Paolo and his infamous castle; next, she asked whether he currently had a wife; third, she asked where she might see him. At the races taking place the next morning in Stirming, the nearby town.

Early the next morning they harnessed the team of horses; the groom climbed up onto the box seat; Miss Ilsebill rocked back and forth on the cushion.

Carriages and wagons sped down the dead-straight avenues before making a wide turn in front of the gates to the racecourse. The sky was steel blue and a summery breeze was blowing. The people crowded into the stands around the wide, green racecourse, filling them up; the din of the voices and vehicles roared, a giant bird, across the empty space encircled by the track.

Miss Ilsebill drove up to the paddock last, shortly before the start. Two gentle white horses pulled the open blue-lined carriage through the crunching sand. She climbed out, in a flowing blue velvet dress, a white ostrich feather waving over the bare nape of her neck; she glided through the wooden gate to her place. She had ivory skin, perfect features. Her deep dark eyes slipped lingeringly over the people and objects around her like a slimy snail's body, leaving a trace. She sat there smiling, chewing chocolate.

Baron Paolo leaned against the post and watched with pleasure, shielding his peering eyes with his soft felt hat, as the white horses trotted up. When the white ostrich feather stood straight in the wind, he walked the four steps down the staircase, elbowed his way through the crowd, and approached Miss Ilsebill. He held up his empty hands like an Arab and bowed his head. She was startled, then laughed. The favorite's name was Calvello. Brown, with lean legs, he was running nonchalantly behind the pack; two laps had already been run and the horses were reaching the home stretch. Miss Ilsebill let the silver paper drop, held her strong chin in her hand, and cheered at the horse's controlled calm. They were near the finish line when the jockey in blue and white leaned right next to the horse's ear and whispered, "Calvello, ho, Calvello." The animal lowered its head, sprang ahead in four leaps, and won. Miss Ilsebill beamed. The noise of the crowd swept over her. As soon as the steeplechase was over, she stood up and

invited the silent man to come with her in her carriage. As they rode through the woods to the south of town, he told her that he was Baron Paolo di Selvi; his fate had brought him here; that he lived on the heath. She told him that she was Miss Ilsebill; she knew he had lost three wives at his castle on the heath; she pitied his fate. At which point he gave her a gloomy look and lowered his gray head; the groom, though, swung the horses around; they rode back along the avenue, on the straight road to the heath. The road narrowed at the turnoff to the castle. Paolo took the reins from the coachman. The horses balked. He climbed out and pulled them. They moved forward, under the blows of the whips; they snorted, they wanted to bolt, but he held the reins taut.

The gray castle stood showily in the wilderness, the tip of a white cliff towering up behind the top of the lady's wing of the building. Paolo sat up straight in his white hat. His tan cheeks and temples were sunken; his obliquely set gray eyes stared vacantly; only his mouth was round and soft and yearning, as always. They reached the gate in the twilight. He said goodbye and held out his hand. Miss Ilsebill, though, climbed out of the carriage and offered to stay with him for a few days as a guest; she wanted to care for him and cheer him with beautiful music. She moved into the rooms in the lady's wing.

They went riding mornings and afternoons; Ilsebill sang and played for him in the castle's chambers. She wore dresses colored nixie-green and other bright colors; there was a white gleam in her eyes when she danced on the carpets; she had tied her black hair in braids that she held in her flashing teeth. Paolo lay dully on the cushions, smoked, and hung back in the screen of smoke; later he launched himself onto the carpets, looked at her curiously with his light eyes, heard her hum along to the sound of the guitar that her maidservant held. His voice grew brighter, his footsteps quicker. And once, when they were standing on the balcony, she broke out in clumsy sobs. She wanted to know what was wrong with him, wanted to help him. He merely took her two hot ivory hands and placed them on his brow, while whispering the words of a foreign prayer; she clung to his neck while he quaked in terror and said something out loud, screamed something that she couldn't understand. All at once he was quiet and gentle again, and he walked Miss Ilsebill back to her room. That night, while the baron slept in the gentleman's wing, she crept alone, defiant and somber, to the door of the locked room into which the cliff side penetrated. She jiggled the door, she shoved it with her shoulder, panting, but the lock held fast. Then she took the golden cross from her neck, beseeched the Mother of God for help, and saw a sliding bolt at the foot of the door. She slid it up, crushing her finger; it was hard, her whole arm hurt.

The door sprang silently open. Delicate Ilsebill, wrapped in a black scarf, raised her candle: It was a narrow, pleasant room, the little table and walls covered in affectionate womanly frippery; the rough jagged cliff face formed the long back wall, casting strange shadows in the unsteady light; a bed with a green spread stood in a recess, raised off the ground, with two steps leading up to it. Miss Ilsebill skipped happily across the thick carpet, threw off her scarf, breathed in the weak smell of flowers, lit two lights, and the room became completely domestic and cozy. Green Japanese silk hung down from the ceiling, paintings and tapestries smiled gently and peacefully, even the bizarre cliff face shimmered like a fantastical, playful fancy. She closed the door softly, jumped onto the bed, lay there dreaming for hours, and slipped back to her room early the next morning, after extinguishing the lamps and carefully shoving the bolt back down. "Nothing happened, nothing happened to me," she said to herself happily.

Night after night, she glided through the corridors to sleep in the cliff room. By day, though, Miss Ilsebill chatted, sang, and wooed the preoccupied man without end. She looked brightly at him with those deep-black eyes that slipped over the things around her, and one time, when she had danced before him beneath the five whispering veils, and he held her wrists, laughing at her crazy leaps and jumps, she flung down her beauty before him and, hanging on his neck, pleaded, "I am yours, your one and only, Paolo."

"Are you, Miss Ilsebill? Is that what you are?" And his look was not bright, not hot, but so full of melancholy and doubt, so inconsolable, that she shrank back from him, wrapped the veils back around her, and crept from the room. Yet he enveloped her in so much quiet reverence that pale-cheeked Ilsebill was entirely plunged into astonished happiness.

On their rambles through the forest, the black knight often carried her in his arms, and he prayed in his harsh foreign tongue, sometimes falling to his strong knees. She never raised her lips to his mouth; only rarely did he take her ivory hands and press them to his brow. What dresses did fair-ankled Ilsebill wear? Into how many braids was her blue-black hair woven? Green dresses she wore, like the silk in the cliff room; green leaves lay upon her hair, woven into three thick braids. Miss Ilsebill and Paolo played and hunted together, often sat by the sea, and dreamed together. Paolo's eyes sparkled.

One afternoon she told him she wanted to ask him for something. And when Paolo kindly asked what, she bit her lower lip and said that she had to tell him something. Mightn't it be a good idea if she sent for a doctor from town—she thought she was a bit sick. Paolo's lips turned white as snow and he breathed

heavily, with eyes closed: What was wrong? She said she always heard, almost always, a soft scrabbling sound. It was a soft sound, very far away, a low regular scraping, rattling, scrabbling, like an animal running across the sand and constantly stopping to pant for breath. It was so subtle that it often sounded to her like a whistle or hiss. He stood by the window and blew on the pane; in a rough voice, he blurted out that no doctor was needed for an illness like that, she just needed a diversion, she had to go hunting, take a trip; the best thing of all would be if she went away. Then Miss Ilsebill laughed at the top of her lungs and said that her two horses had only barely made it down the road here, and where would she find horses now that would take her back without him?

The stocky man had turned around. His brow was furrowed, his gaunt face glowed hot, and he hoarsely protested that she should go, she should go, she should go, he didn't want her; he wanted no woman and no one and nothing; he hated them all, all the mocking senseless things; she should go, oh yes, she should go. He would give her a knife right here and now, she could carve her illness out of her heart with that. When Miss Ilsebill stepped over to him, hips swaying, he staggered to her, faltering like a child, and looked at her so full of melancholy, so inconsolable, that she stroked his hair and broke out in uninhibited sobs while he trembled at her breast. She asked him no questions; she secretly took a bodkin from the wall and hid it under her dress.

Miss Ilsebill now often went out alone in her thin dress, roaming as far as the city walls. She occasionally brought back mussel shells for Paolo, blue stones, fragrant narcissi, too, which he loved. And on a path outside of town she spoke to an old farmer, who said the baron had sold himself body and soul to an evil monster. The monster had lived since primeval times at the bottom of the ancient ocean that was now the heath; it lived in the cliff and needed a human being every couple of years. It sounds like a fairy tale, the farmer said, but it's true. If fornication and godlessness were not so rampant among women today, he said, the poor knight would have been freed from the beast long ago. She was glad to hear the story, because she had long since known it herself.

In her room she played with a lizard she had caught. One time, when Paolo heard her complaining beneath her smiles that all she was doing was looking for the animal that was scrabbling and grumbling and rustling so loud, he gave a long, shaking laugh and said that he wanted to summon from town a poet he knew, to entertain her with fairy tales and strange stories. This was someone who understood the soul, Paolo said.

The next day, at noon, the poet sauntered up the wide main road to the castle; the three of them sat down at the table. Then Paolo invited him to play the doctor for Miss Ilsebill and cure her of her melancholy, which was scrabbling and rumbling inside her and threatening to swallow her up. The poet talked to her in her balconied room; he was a slender young man with long arms and free movements. He overwhelmed her with masterful looks; they laughed together, bent over her pictures. He suggested they dance, since the desire to do so had already awakened in the wild creatures; they danced together, under Ilsebill's last veil, and, unchained, she leapt with him onto the balcony and laughed all of a sudden at the castle and the swamp and the scrabbling beast. She bent over the iron railing, shrieked out her laughter across the dusky heath. Crazy, yes, she *was* crazy, a corpse with a living body. Let every antediluvian dragon in the world break free and murder Paolo's happiness—she knew only one beast that wanted to break free, and that was herself. She reached up her voluptuous arms to the sky, cried out to the ocean that she wanted to leave, wanted to travel and wander, and wanted always to love, always to kiss. Before darkness fell, the poet departed; trilling a tune, she pulled a green leaf from her hair and stuck it between her lips.

No sooner was it dark in the castle than Miss Ilsebill threw on her black scarf, picked up a candle, her cheeks still burning, and loaded up her left arm with two pieces of wood: She wanted to end by setting the cliff room on fire and then vanishing into the night and mist. The yacht that the poet had arranged for their flight was already waiting in the ocean. She panted down the dark hallway; footsteps came out of the darkness toward her. She let the wood slide softly down past her knees to the floor—it was Paolo, who asked her nothing, put her candle gently down on the ground, and tenderly, wordlessly, stroked her hair and hands. Miss Ilsebill's black eyes did not slip away from his, which looked back, full of sympathy and bestowing a terrifying consolation; did not budge from the calm openness of his bright face. His obliquely set eyes showered her with gratitude; his mouth approached her lips for the first time and they kissed. He said he was going into town tonight. She cowered in the hallway; the candle had gone out, uncontrollable fear shook her shoulders. She raised the cross with both hands, stood up, left the pieces of wood there; she had to go down the hall, had to go to the door, had to go into the chamber. Her face was hard, then it contorted helplessly. Miss Ilsebill dragged herself along behind the cross, crying, castigating herself. She tugged the bolt up. Wringing her hands, she walked into the room, struck herself on the chest, and fell asleep on the soft carpet.

In a dream she heard a scrabbling and crashing, and a loud cry of men's voices: "Ilsebill, save yourself! Save yourself, Ilsebill, Ilsebill!" She stood up. A whirling flame, a burning mouth came out of the cliff. The cliff burst apart in the middle and water poured out of the cave, a ghoulish sea monster rolled and turned, a jellyfish with countless writhing tentacles; the quaking, purple-red flame shot out of its body like breath. Miss Ilsebill rushed for the door, couldn't find it, screamed shrilly, insanely, "Paolo, Paolo!" The beast sizzled toward her; a paralyzing sweetness flooded through her; she beat in deathly fear against the wall. A bare spear was hanging there and she yanked it down and hurled it blindly into the flame. Half collapsing, she found the door, ran screaming through the silent halls, beating the air around her with her singed hands, and fell to the floor outside the door to her room.

Proud Miss Ilsebill lay there until the gray light of morning. At last she stood up, she took off her shoes and stockings, tied up her braids, and walked barefoot, numbly calm, in just her thin dress, out of the building, through the gates, toward the town, across the heath, until she reached where the birch trees are. She did not once turn around. Behind her it stormed and raged, a thundering and bursting from the sea. A spring flood, a mile-wide gray wall broke through the dams and dikes and, rolling and foaming, poured over the accursed plain, covering once more what had once been its own along with a gray castle and many poor sleeping people. The terrible water hurled its waves right up to the hill of birch trees near the town. Ilsebill wandered on the hill. And as she walked among the trees, a fog came into the forest. She prayed at one tree, hung her cross up on it, and from that tree came a fine, fine smoke, smelling sweeter than lilacs. It wrapped around the wandering Ilsebill, sheathing her in the folds of a wide, sweet-smelling cloak. She could not see one step ahead of her, one step behind; when she realized that it was the cloak of the Mother of God sheathing her, she started crying like a fainthearted girl. She ran faster and faster, but fell at every step. "But I want to live. Oh, dear Mother of God, let me see the flowers again, let me see the little birds. Oh, dear Mother of God, be good to me. I see—you are good to me, the way I am good to you." Her lips grew pale. She turned thinner and thinner. With a sigh, she dissolved and disappeared into the delicate fog wafting over the birch trees.

The sun was already rising over the water when a black stallion carrying a knight came trotting slowly up through the gap in the city walls. The knight rode over the hill, and when he was at its peak, he saw miles and miles of gray, writhing water foaming before him, and no road, no castle. He dismounted, tied the horse to a trunk, and walked among the birches. A tiny gold cross was hanging on one tree; a sweet smell surrounded it. He took off his soft hat, kneeled down, and leaned his brow on the bark. "You have granted us great fear, holy Mother of God; you have granted us great love, holy Mother of God."

On the day when the dam broke, the townsfolk saw the black knight race once again through the town. They heard word of him once more, many years later, when the wars were raging in Central America. He was leading volunteer troops against the Indian infidels and a surprise attack left them all dead on the battlefield.

THE OTHER MAN

DR. WILLIAM Converdon, the famous women's doctor in Boston, placed an advertisement on April 14 in the *Daily News*, seeking a secretary. Since being elected president of the Gynecological Society, he had been excessively burdened with paperwork; his hunch-backed housekeeper, to whom he had spoken of his troubles, decided to advertise for a lady—they were cheaper and, most important, easier to get rid of.

On April 18, at the close of his consultation hours, she presented two women to him. Converdon turned around indifferently on his chair, accepted with a nod the slight bow of an angular, black-haired, intelligent young lady, and directed his cold gray eyes for some time longer at the blond girl next to her, who handed him her references with a blush. Running his hand over his wide jaw, he decided, without a glance at the papers, on the shy blond plump-cheeked one, because she had beautiful braids and it would make him nervous to send her charms out onto the street, and also because he could hope to get tired of her quickly.

At the start of dictation the next morning, the gaunt man felt a disturbance in his train of thought due to the girl's presence. He therefore did not hesitate long, pacing back and forth across the consultation room's runner, before coming to a stop behind the chair in which she was sitting, wearing a blue dress, her head with its neatly wound braids bent over the desk. During his inspection of her back he got caught by her bare neck, so at that point he slowly lifted her white standing collar and kissed her in the slit between the collar and the dress. She startled back; her eyes lit up; when he pulled her pale neck hairs through his teeth, she giggled and leaned her hot cheek back against his head and stretched out on the chair. Then, as he brushed her cheeks with his thin lips, she suddenly threw herself forward across the rolltop desk, buried her head in her arms, and sobbed very quietly for a short moment, while he pensively stood behind her, his angular face lowered, left hand on his chin. She shook herself again, wiped her eyes with a very thin hankie, stood up, turned around, and looked up at him with reddened eyes. The blond-haired girl—her name was Mery Walter—then lay her head against his white waistcoat and, to his great surprise, offered her mouth to him. At first he was inclined to reach his free left hand into his jacket pocket for his pince-nez, so that he could observe the phenomenon up close, but instead he resolutely kissed her and carefully called her "my dear Miss Walter." Miss Walter sat back down on her chair and he strolled contentedly up and down the runner, dictating on. When the work was finished, he made her, since it just came to mind, several declarations of love, which at first she unthinkingly took down in shorthand with the rest, but when her name was mentioned she understood; she strolled arm in arm back and forth on the runner with the startled man; the busy doctor was mightily pleased, however, with the rapid course the proceedings had taken.

He went to the theater with her, had dinners with her, this went on for a few days. Until, precisely one week later, as he sat on his chaise longue after finishing a dictation and observed Miss Walter, another thought came to him. She was just then tying a lace-trimmed white pinafore over her blue dress and looking down at her white tennis shoes when he asked for permission to button the back of her pinafore, and in the process of performing this action he whispered in her ear from behind, in a faltering voice, that perhaps she might bed down for the night in his most immediate vicinity. She inspected the tips of her fingers for a time, jerked free of his grip, and then stamped her foot; the first thing she said was, softly, "Impossible."

He, just as softly: "Why not?"

He immediately switched to using the informal pronoun with her, in anticipation of the coming eventualities.

Because she lived at home, didn't she, that's why.

A telegraph was cabled off to her mother, stating that Miss Mery had to accompany her employer on a trip for a day; the hunchbacked housekeeper was informed and affably dusted a room that had been used for many years for such purposes; Dr. Converdon, in accord with his plan, spent the very pleasant night with his secretary.

The only things that disturbed him, in the course of his necessary efforts with the girl, were the vigor of her initial resistance, her conspicuous excitement throughout the entire night, and, especially, the discovery of her indisputable virginity. Dr. Converdon was secretly filled with extraordinary indignation by this last finding. He got up very early that morning and, in front of the washbasin, loudly rebuked the girl for her way of life: One wouldn't have thought it possible, if one saw her with her blond braids; what did she want from him; this was evidence of an incredible immaturity, of a complete misunderstanding

of his person; he had no idea how he would ever get over this fact about her past. She cried, sitting by the window in just her shirt, cried terribly; she begged for forgiveness; she herself had no idea how it had happened. He dictated at her in a rage for hours that morning, dictated until she slumped forward over the desk, half asleep. He was beside himself at how crude this apparently harmless person had turned out to be.

He wanted to kick her out at once. But he thought about how that would be letting her off too easy. She would have loved that, slipping away after this crime against his soul. That night, when she appeared for dinner, he declared that henceforth he was engaging her services for a fixed term, three months to start; she clapped her hands; he insisted that she sign the formal contract he had drawn up. She signed it without reading it and threw her arms around his neck. He smiled grimly. For days on end no one could recognize the serious man in his explosive rage. Before a few days had passed, he had rented an apartment for her in the house next door and relieved her of her position as secretary, hiring an old clerk instead. In his house she would perform the duties of a society lady. There was nothing she needed to do except be in attendance when he wanted.

So she rearranged his furniture, hung up little pennants and love pictures, sat at the table with him every evening. He did not speak a word to her for days at a time; he endured her, she could see his contempt in every expression of his face. One day, while she was calmly eating, his face swelled up purplish red, the veins on his forehead popped out like pencils, his eyes gushed forth, he beat the tabletop next to her with his fists. “You have to stop sitting here night after night at my table! This chair at my table must be kept free. I refuse to tolerate anyone whatsoever sitting in this chair.”

“But, Lorry, where should I sit then?”

“Sit wherever you want. Outside the door. I want this place kept free.”

She stood up, crying, “So you want me to leave?”

“Leave? Typical! You want to leave? Why? Where will you go? Oh, I know you perfectly. You want to leave; you’ve wanted to leave me for a long time. But you have to stay here, I’ll lock you in until you’re tame and obedient. You’re shameless!”

Nonetheless, he instructed the hunchbacked old housekeeper to treat Miss Mery as the daughter of the house, or as his wife, with all possible deference and kindness. That was what he wanted.

The gaunt man, mollified, went strolling once more with the blond girl down the wide shopping streets of Boston; he moved around her with a serious, beseeching gallantry; a plaint of desperate tormented meekness could often be heard in his voice. One time, they were sitting by the window of his consultation room at sunset; overwhelmed, he laid his bare forehead on her round girlish shoulder. “Look, Mery, look how many streets there are—there, on the other side of the square, there are five; there are hundreds more across the river, in the working-class neighborhood, hundreds. Every street has a hundred buildings, and so many men live in every building, younger than me, better than me, handsomer than me. On every floor, behind every one of these windows. They don’t have anything to think about, their thoughts are free the whole livelong day, just imagine it. And they would so like to love you, with your faithful eyes, your fleshy arms. Your body is so taut, your breasts are so firm, with rosy tips; oh, God, what soft smooth skin you have, Mery—and all for me. When it doesn’t make me happy, it weighs me down, makes it hard to breathe. Please, now, don’t ask me again if you should leave. How would that help? I would have to run after you, weeping. I would be so unspeakably happy if you didn’t exist. I would so like to bend down here at the window, take you in my arms, and strew you like a rain of flowers across the pavement, up into those windows, all over me in the room. The thought makes me melt. But no, don’t touch me, don’t comfort me, no, let my head rest on your shoulder, Mery, Mery. . . .”

The girl was careful to avoid him; she prepared his meals, helped him with his work patiently and with infinite gentleness. When he yelled at her, beat his breast with woe at the shackles of such a calamity weighing upon him, she crept off down the stairs, cried at home, came back after a couple of hours, and timidly asked the housekeeper if the master was feeling better now. And already in the hall, he would pull her toward him by the hands, looking morose, and bluster something about a childish proclivity for dramatic tension and about her absurd idealistic notions about people.

She would sit in the carriage next to him when he made his house calls, in a sweeping straw hat with a wide blood-red ribbon in a bow, the ends tied together in a knot under her chin. Like his daughter she sat on the cushion in a fine white cambric dress beside the gaunt, clean-shaven doctor, whose high narrow brow, straight nose, and deep lines around his mouth were hewn in marble. His skull was bald down to the vertebrae; his gray penetrating eyes stared straight ahead.

Her lips were delicate and chaste. That excited him deeply, and he put his hard hand on her mouth with the ice-cold desire to slice off her lips with a thin knife—then all their virtuousness would be gone

—and to cover her meek gentle eyes with a porcelain bell jar; to grab her wavy braids of hair and yank them from her body with one pull, one long scalping pull, the soft pleasing skin, all the smooth white skin, so that she would lie there, Mery, before him, twitching and red, her bare muscles playing, a specimen, a convulsing, snapping animal, Mery.

He had her move fully into his apartment. Even though hardly anyone noticed her in the crowded streets, she had to wear a thick white veil, and the short hunchbacked woman accompanied her. The gaunt man, meanwhile, went by night to the worst neighborhoods outside the city and studied the lost creatures there to learn their obscenities and depravities. Mery's room—closely watched, quiet, curtained in blue—shook with the pair's frenzies. She sat beside him, embraced him, felt sorry for him for being so savage, but he desperately brooded over how he could completely demolish her so that no part of her would be left; he wrung his hands over the fact that she was still sitting beside him as though nothing had happened, sitting with her faithful blue eyes, her simply wound braids, her childlike voice—if only he could leave some mark in her, one single little trace. Until one time when she cried on his chest and asked him if he thought badly of her, given that they were now so beastly to each other; then he wrathfully consoled her, saying she should not ask such outré questions.

The next day, he announced that he wanted to have her trained as an actress. She belonged to all; anyone and everyone could take her, should take her. She was so beautiful, she sang so purely, it was a waste, he said, to let her shrivel up within his four walls. She appeared onstage as a dancer in a cabaret. The curtain whooshed up, the brightly lit skull of the doctor sank down—now he was happy. Now Mery's beauty rested on all the faces in the auditorium; the butcher's wide mouth next to him sucked lecherously at her sweet smile; a rigidity came into the brown doe eyes of the lady next to him as blond Mery bent and stretched the round lines of her thighs in the dance; a sturdy young jackanapes in the front row took bites of her breasts with his opera glasses. Now she fell like a rain of flowers over the room. He rushed off in his equipage, breathing heavily and laughing, and left her alone, left her to the spectators. He hid in his room, shut the doors behind him; his housekeeper served him alone, like back in the good old days, while the chairs around him stood empty, no place was set next to him, and after the meal he overturned the table and chairs and contentedly stretched out his legs on the sofa.

But no sooner did morning come, after the anxious night, than the gentleman stood by the window of his consultation room, looked down at the empty street, and reached out his arms for Mery, that whore, that low soulless thing—for the murderess, the vampire. No spider could treat any fly more cruelly than that creature did him. Every object here in the room spoke of the anguish that she had caused him a thousand times over—the troubles he had with her, while she wallowed in warm shit. No whip to hit her with! Where was she hiding, where was she hiding, his property! His bitch!

Around five in the afternoon she rang the doorbell, smiling, happily excited, in a girlish white dress, beneath a sweeping straw hat, and she threw her arms around his neck and chattered away about how happy she was, how much they had liked her, how much she was looking forward to this evening. He did not ask where she had spent the night. He took her into his arms like a doll and fell on top of her onto the carpet with a loud sob. He kissed her on the mouth and spoke confused words. He begged her, in a hoarse voice, not to be an actress anymore, to stay home with him. She could leave whenever she wanted, but she should stay with him. The girl broke out in terrible sobs and asked what had happened to him. She trembled, lifted him up, and looked at the man, with face blazing, eyes teary, lips quaking.

The next morning he drove to the civic registry with her, and again for a second time after a few days; then they were married.

They had spent a few happy weeks together at a seaside resort when, one morning, while putting on her tennis shoes, she heard a terrible scream from the next room. Converdon was standing in his shirtsleeves bolt upright in the middle of the room with a crumpled letter in his right hand. He stretched his arms up toward the ceiling, shrilly screamed Mery's name, and collapsed onto the carpet. She lifted up his feverish head and he stammered, "It's all over for me." Then, after he calmed down, he said she should leave him alone for a bit, he had had a nervous attack.

Written in the crumpled letter was:

Dear Doctor,

Your wife is very beautiful. I am going to go after her. You are fully as certain as I am myself, my dear doctor, that I will win her. It will be difficult, nay impossible, to carry out my efforts with regard to your beautiful wife without you noticing. I therefore request that you, first, acknowledge my plan, and, second, in light of the inevitable result, not cause any difficulties. As for you, my dear doctor, I recommend, moved by my great goodwill toward you, that you commit suicide on the twenty-fifth of this month in Charles Park, leaving behind a specific statement of your motive.

P.S. I own an automobile and would like to put the car at your disposal while you make all the necessary arrangements.

Paul Wheatstren, Acrobat

Dr. Converdon answered Mr. Paul Wheatstren, Acrobat, after barely an hour. He confirmed receipt of the latter's cordial letter dated today, thanked him for the binding appointment of date of death, and requested prompt delivery of the automobile, which he duly promised to maintain in good condition.

The first drive Dr. Converdon took with the car was out to the acrobat's country house, to arrange that nothing about the coming events should reach Mery's ears. Wheatstren, a squat, broad-shouldered man with a square, ruddy face, late thirties, ordinary features, but clear, calm eyes, received him. He shook the doctor's hand, laughing, and explained how happy he was to have met the doctor's beautiful wife and her honorable spouse.

He hoped to spend many happy hours with Mrs. Mery. They sat down for a glass of wine. Wheatstren did not neglect to make the conciliatory remark, after the first glass, that the lady was not responsible for the impending demise of his guest, nor was he himself; rather, said demise would come about on its own, given the circumstances, and thus it would also be reasonable to carry out the suicide on the twenty-fifth entirely out in the open, like any other decent and seemly action. Over a second glass, Dr. Converdon went up to his astonished host with a drawn revolver and discussed with him the possibility of putting a bullet in his, the host's, right eye, immediately in fact—an advantageous approach, he said, because the latter was unarmed at the moment and he was an excellent shot with his trusty Browning. The other man, without a moment's pause for reflection, confirmed the possibility of such a course of action, but added, with a superior smile, without moving in his chair, that nothing about the situation would thereby be changed in the least. Another man would come along next month and find Mrs. Mery beautiful and inform Dr. Converdon. Wheatstren stood up with a reproachful look in his eyes and went over to the doctor, who lowered his revolver, ashamed. He had written to Mr. Converdon, he said, because he considered him a reasonable man; such men surely did not take it upon themselves to try to delay the onset of necessary events. He took the revolver from the doctor with a good-natured laugh, clapped him on the shoulder, and they contemplatively drank some more wine.

Back home, Dr. Converdon hurriedly put on tails and a top hat and drove to church. He listened attentively to the sermon and asked to be announced to the minister after the service. Sitting on a chair by the door, he explained the situation and asked the minister whether the latter, as a connoisseur of the human soul, believed that the motive for the suicide set to take place on the twenty-fifth might be eliminated. He himself, he said, was a woman's doctor, and thus not well acquainted with psychology. The minister, a young and deeply serious man with the face of a Jesuit, discussed the situation with the doctor attentively and thoroughly. At the conclusion of their talk, he explicated that, at least insofar as one could tell from the viewpoint of psychology, there was a certain darkness and a narrowness present in the doctor; as an inborn quality, nourished by education and lifestyle, it could hardly be eliminated at this stage. The situation was a happy one for Mrs. Mery, he said; to the doctor he could offer only the consolation of alluding to the triviality and meaninglessness of the doctor's life.

With this the celebrated gynecologist came to a full and complete understanding. He still had two weeks to live. In the days that followed, as he clearly reflected on the situation, he was overcome with a calm he had absolutely never known. He went around with a feeling of joy that all could see from the gleam in his eye. In particular, he treated his young wife with deep gratitude, drove her in the automobile out for walks in the country, was truly profoundly devoted to her with all of his heart during this time. She had granted him these beautiful, hopeful days; for a few days he was alone once more. How simply all the trifles of the soul could be resolved through a mechanical movement in accord with the good advice of Paul Wheatstren, Acrobat. He and Mrs. Mery went daily to see the cabaret in which the man in question was performing; the doctor never tired of praising the man's suppleness; he bought a picture of the acrobat and placed it in his bedroom, next to his bed.

Two days before his demise, he went to see everyone he knew in the area and told them of his plan—he went to the shops, the greengrocer's, the boutiques. He added that, in light of the pleasure of leaving them, he was bequeathing them a legacy in the form of one thousand dollars each; he would also be sending them telegrams an hour before his decease with the heartiest curses. He observed that this declaration produced approving astonishment on all sides, and that they gratefully kissed his hand.

On the twenty-fourth, he decreed in writing that he was to be painstakingly dissected. On the morning of the twenty-fifth, he parted from his beautiful wife in boundless joy: The serious, bald-headed doctor danced in his tails around her, kissed her, and couldn't stop laughing with her. At about ten o'clock he sat down in the automobile, handed over the telegrams, drove to Charles Park, and left the car at the

entrance to the park, having left a note with the news of his death taking place at ten thirty. Standing amid the bushes, he realized that in his joy he had left the revolver at home, so he hanged himself, not without difficulty, with his necktie.

The autopsy, performed on the twenty-sixth, produced no findings whatsoever.

On the very evening of the postmortem, Mr. Wheatstren paid the widow a visit and told her that, as she knew, he was a friend of the dearly departed. He did not want to make any big speeches, simply inform her that he had it in mind to spend a number of happy hours with her. He asked her to honor the memory of the dearly departed, for it was solely in deference to their happiness together that he had hanged himself on the twenty-fifth with his tie. The broken blonde shed abundant tears and said that that sounded just like Dr. Converdon, he was always so good to her. It was all happening so fast, but life was like that, wasn't it.

She drove out to his country house with him in his automobile and enjoyed happy hours of her own. He, for his part, soon felt disgusted by the gentle blue-eyed lady's routine while enjoying her pleasures, as he had hoped to be the one to teach her himself. So, after a week, he took over the management of her estate, cursed Dr. Converdon's treachery, and asked into her background. Upon learning that she had started by working as Dr. Converdon's secretary, the acrobat remarked that he had no need of a secretary, or rather, he saw no point in having one, as a gymnast. He would go on conscientiously managing her wealth, would guarantee her an adequate monthly interest payment, but her whole character seemed to suggest that she was not made to be with a single man such as him, as did the talents she had demonstrated. He forcefully urged her to monetize her gifts; one runs through even the greatest store of capital eventually, he remarked. She met his analysis with an open mind. And Mr. Wheatstren drove the young blond lady, whom he also married, to the racecourse, to the theater, treated her roughly and calculatingly. She praised him at every turn, however, because he offered her the greatest thing that there is on earth: considerable variety.

MEMOIRS OF A JADED MAN

I HAVE never felt it necessary to write about one's own life. True, one thing is just as unimportant as the next, and it doesn't make much difference whether you conquer countries or pray or embrace women or write memoirs. True, I knew quite early on that some things can be savored only in recollection, and I have certainly accepted patiently various dismal and embarrassing things for just that reason. But still, I never wanted to write anything about myself—I didn't want to, and that was that.

But now I do want to do something to enlighten the people who read this. And also draw up a complaint.

It must be done! A loud voice must ring out against the enemy who murders in the dark and has done so for centuries. Who runs rampant in the dark and traps us. That is why I am writing this.

•

I first heard about love when I was still relatively young. I read about it in novels, poems, later in the works of certain philosophers. The sources I availed myself of were truly diverse: in part the above-named discursive or elevated observations, in part the newspapers, whose daily chronicle of suicides gave me many a desired hint.

But what I read there seemed so bizarre to me that I could not believe it. I read about love and it seemed like an expedition to the North Pole, an Indian attack on a railroad train. People told me that someday I too would fall in love—but the thought filled me with fear and sadness, as a disease would. For a long time I could not bring myself to take love seriously. And so I was and remained happy, my heart at peace.

•

One force that truly motivates me is a thirst for education. I owe many things in my life to it, both good and bad. Once I had reached a certain age, it felt inappropriate not to possess any knowledge of so widespread a human activity as love, and to be so far behind my contemporaries. So I set out in search of love. The men I turned to first—men known to be intelligent and reasonable, in leading positions, partly in government, partly in industry and finance—responded with a smile when I asked them about love. Some told me straight out that it was all just pointless chatter. Others felt that love was something for people who had nothing better to do, and they left it to their half-grown daughters with time to spend on classic authors, playing the piano, and love.

This was what I learned from the men of the world. When nothing more was forthcoming from them, and their contradictory information had left me crestfallen, I turned inward for guidance and set out for myself. This decision would prove to be of the greatest importance for my entire life. More and more I oriented myself toward love; I wanted to come to terms with love, once and for all. It was a serious matter.

I had been told that love was not about the inborn need of a man for a woman, with which I was not unfamiliar, but something much higher, delicate, subtle, impossible to speak of in words of prose. I set out to find this thing so difficult to describe.

On my walks through the streets in various cities and countries, I sedulously observed people: young people, old people, girls, soldiers, officers, clerks.

I proceeded systematically and with great discretion, trying to achieve an understanding of the subtle process in question. I sought out the cities in which love was said especially to reside and did not take my eyes off the people there. After all, love must express itself in some specific way, and I labored, though in vain, to find out from the crowd what that way might be. I gave particular scrutiny to the clothing of the people I passed—the color of their skirts, shirts, coats—but I found no salient features, and I was also far from clear about what the special feature might actually be: A particular shape of the boot, a sharp nose, a necktie? The friends with whom I shared my observations laughed at me like mad and proudly dashed off obscure remarks such as: "A matter of the soul that you cannot see; you have to feel, feel, feel!" But they were superficial people, satisfied with these words and not realizing that this was precisely where my problem lay. When they tried to describe to me these feelings of theirs, it was always a combination of rephrasing their simple need for a woman and using the over-refined poetic

phrases I could only shake my head at.

My search had yielded no results and undeterred I continued on my way. Yet my never-ending exertions had given me a case of the nerves. I felt anxious and uncertain. Ailing as I was, I felt neglected —so foolish was my heart—and I dragged myself around like a cripple and peered like a beggar into the faces of people on the street. So great was my unhappiness that even my sister, with whom I lived, noticed my slumped posture. Incidentally, I continued to eat and drink as usual. Since no depression or gloom could deprive me of my appetite. I always did my duty.

•

I am naturally drawn to women, to all women, and even more to everything that woman is. Very early on, I noticed that I tended to adopt a polite, deferential tone whenever I talked to young girls, even babies in swaddling clothes. I often made the little girls and their nannies laugh when, with my large, broad figure, elephantine as I am, I walked up to them, doffed my top hat to the playing girls, and formally paid my respects to the prattling little things. When I bent down over them, a feeling of something like shyness came over me, my heart pounded, and my mouth watered, gushed really, as it always does when I am excited. I tried hard to put myself in an advantageous light with them; to do so, I spent much time studying child psychology. Sometimes, when I looked these suckling creatures in the eyes, their blind and motionless child's eyes, a dark dread rose up within me at the violence lying dormant there, and my fingers itched to nip in the bud a future pregnant with horrors.

But there will be no end to the laughing at me if I admit that I also treated with reverence those inanimate objects that the German language classifies as feminine. Though only sometimes. I frequently eyed the green table *Lampe* in my room with respect, kept my distance from her, took care not to touch her, and even draped a white sheet over her at night because I was ashamed to undress in front of her. Occasionally I crept insecurely around my wardrobe sometimes, and, after a long hesitation, paid tribute to it with a deep bow and obliging smile; better, I decided, would be to say that I paid tribute to her. For me, the neuter noun was feminine.

Later, my feeling for women took on a darker cast. There is nothing so pitiable as a woman. One time, I saw a female dog walking slowly in front of me, losing blood, now in drips, now in a thick stream, leaving a trail of it behind on the sidewalk. Tears came to my eyes when I looked women in the face. No sooner do the unsuspecting young things start to gain a little strength than their burden assaults them, unrelentingly repeated, and they drip with blood. And the blood streams until they shrivel up. Labor pains attack them, shatter their bodies, make them decrepit before their time.

And is there any creature on earth more wretched than a mother? I cannot think of anyone as deeply vulnerable as a mother through her child. Nothing is as exposed, as needy, as a mother.

Should not gentle words then roll off my tongue when I speak to women? But I have never spoken such words. A poet and connoisseur of human character might perhaps ask why. Maybe I am too passive by nature.

Still, while on my search for love, I often enough ran across women I noticed and to whom I thought I should say something. But I didn't lay a finger on them. I glanced furtively at them, observed their movements, their way of speaking, laughing, and looking, and something like trepidation clutched at my chest and turned my eyes aside, away from them. Not a sound betrayed me to them, I even forbade myself quiet dreamy thoughts of them. I believe that the things I want have to come to me, and even then I would be reluctant to take them up. It is shameful not only to bare and expose the body—every word, every movement betrays us. And so shame crushes us into the ground; there is no salvation from shame except death. And nevertheless my passivity had the effrontery to live and continue to breathe, like an animal.

Many times I anxiously ran away from these women, far up into the mountains. There was fog there at every turn, shutting me in like a cramped little room. With every puff of wind the door sprang open, and the ravines, the rising and falling of the white air, revived me. Often a denser pillar strode upright through the middle of the valley and then lay down on the cliff like a long-haired greyhound at my feet.

I cried in my way, without tears, over not being able to find love.

•

After I had returned from my path thus empty-handed, tedium dug its claws more savagely into me and I launched myself upon women, determined to love.

I had approached people for advice without success, had hunted in vain for the distinguishing features of love, looking and looking until my eyes were sick; now I pushed ahead to the source, offering up

myself as the guinea pig.

As for which girl I should approach, at first I didn't know and I asked my friends. They said long experience had shown that the choice was basically irrelevant. Then they told me about a girl who loved many, was loved by many, and was apparently very heroic.

I set off to see her, gained entry to her apartment, and, pursuing my earlier investigations, began by asking her resolutely and with the seriousness that behooves a man for an objective statement of facts about love. What were the signs by which others could see that she loved many? She smiled heroically.

Then, acting on my friends' advice, I said and did to her several things that I had often had occasion to observe. I was soon thereby able to awaken in her the impression that I loved her. From that point on, she made in my presence the peculiar bodily movements, gestures, and facial expressions that must be coextensive with love or apparently constitute its particular nature. A light gliding of the palm of the hand across my cheeks, repeated often, rather as though wiping dust; sucking movements of the lips with a salivary moistening of my mouth; a snarling and whimpering of the voice; tightly pressing one's own limbs as a whole against those of the opponent. In addition, a stereotyped repetition of various mindless phrases, and eventually uncleanliness and letting oneself go, which is apparently a major proof of love. I observed this condition with great interest for a time. Once, though, when the girl, indulging in similar movements, assured me that I loved her—something there was no way at all for her to know—I asked her, confused and upset, what had given her that idea and what supported this claim of hers. For up until then I had felt only the self-explanatory natural drive toward her, as well as occasional amazement, aversion, and friendly superiority. Eventually I strongly denied it. At which point the characteristic movements in my presence from the other side came to a stop. I myself had never made these movements involuntarily but always intentionally, always planned—not so the girl, however. It repelled me to go around with this female, but the sense of duty propelled me. The drive to see things through to the end is strong in me. In the period that followed, I always did to women everything I had ever read and heard about; I was very amicable to them. I kissed their mouths and their breasts and waited very patiently to see if love would arise in me; I too let fall various indecent turns of phrase, as befitted conversations with young ladies. But no matter how I exerted myself in this activity, I waited in vain for that unique, much-vaunted sensation. I wore myself out unspeakably.—I say all this only to show that I have a right to draw up this complaint here. I left nothing untried; I followed so many paths that what I was seeking had to have found me somewhere.

In those days I also often walked right past the women who filled me with trepidation; one of them made an effort and sent me an affectionate letter because of my great sadness. At first I wanted to open up to her and write her that I was sad because I could not find love. Then, in my industrious zeal, I even considered undertaking attempts with her, but at the thought of it my heart was in my throat, my chest constricted, I could hardly breathe.

It was hopeless after all. I had tried so long, but in vain.

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I realized that women were wasting my time. The information I had been given at the start—that love was just so much pointless chatter—had not been misleading. I am writing a complaint, and a warning. Is there anyone who would stand up and deny me the right to do so? I am healthy, I have no reason to think that any part of me is malfunctioning. I have always been a capable person who knows how to behave himself, rarely makes mistakes, and shows a deft hand everywhere.

And now I also understand the game the women are playing. Men are stronger than women: They can beat them to death—and yet they let them make them miserable. Through the perfidious institution of love. That is what protects women. This deceptive word is stronger than muscles of steel. I am too rational to let myself be caught. These extraordinarily noxious and hateworthy creatures turn men into fools and actors. Because among men, too—I say it loud and clear—no one knows what the love their deceived spirits speak of actually is. No one understands love but everyone plays at it—out of fear of women. So fainthearted this tradition has made men; so mighty is the power of deception.

Steps against love need to be taken by the state, just as against alcohol and tuberculosis. The natural relationship between the antagonists needs to be reinstated. Women need to shut up. I am in favor of a well-trained tribe of whores; in the present circumstances, it is as necessary to found whore academies as it is to lay new railroad tracks. Silence and tact would be taught there, as well as a quick understanding for certain things, a lovely gait, modulation of the voice, singing, but also moaning and whispering. What is now isolated hearsay about the arts of love could be learned by many. Infinite masses of energy in men would thereby be freed up for other activities that do more to promote civilized culture, while the art of pleasure, nourished by a community and tended with special care, would soon enter an unprecedented

golden age. Love needs to be gradually expelled from the world. More important than the women's movement, the campaign for bread, is the men's movement against this heavy, undignified yoke of love. The natural relationship, as I expressed it above, between male and female has to be restored.

With a loud voice I cry out against the enemy who murders in darkness. And has for centuries.

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I found someone on my search: the washerwoman in the hotel where I live. She is hunchbacked, has a square fat face with doglike eyes and pouting lips. I have never seen anything like her slovenly way of walking and her squalid clothes.

When she sees me in the hall, as she's standing in the kitchen in front of the tub with her sleeves rolled up high, her lips bulge, she rubs the nose mounted above them with the back of her left hand and grins.

Women are all the same.

It amazed me at first, this grin, so that something like bitterness came over me—bitterness, no, that is not the right word: rage and pain. I threatened her with my fists when she laughed, and I rushed at her. Who did she think I was? I am a free man. Women are all the same. Either they smile at me so that I want to punch them in the face or they cloak themselves with all that time-wasting verbosity, as though it were a matter of administering the holy sacrament: They act out love, the sly little slaves, the phony masters, I can see right through them. I can smell right through them, through all their perfumes I can sniff them out. Anyone who has spent the night with a female—I want to speak clearly here—knows what I mean: He knows the specific, sharp, repulsive smell that lingers on a woman; the slaves are branded by nature. I could smell this fume as soon as I stood next to her, the washerwoman. She was genuine. My mouth watered: Women nauseate me. I grabbed her there in the kitchen and dragged her behind me to my room, because I didn't know what else there was to do to her after that smile. In my room, though, I threw her down. She turned her back to me; she betrayed womankind to me. I feasted with mocking words on the quintessence of woman, the lowest female, and defiled her. How I laugh at love! Women paraded past me in my thoughts, women I knew, women I revered, also the women who filled me with trepidation—the thin one, with her blond hair all combed up—the delicate, slightly consumptive one, oh, that low black fur cap she wore—the proud beasts paraded past me. I sat in my lair with the laundry girl and defiled all the sleeping creatures. They could not see me, could not tear the unsuspecting lump away from me and save themselves from degradation.

Oh, how pious I am, I am very pious.

When the girl turned affectionate, I flew into a boundless, utterly terrible rage, threw her out the door, and planted my heel in her fat haunches. That's how furious I was. Later, too, I screamed at her, threatened her, slapped her frantically, and pulled her hair, without feeling any pleasure or relief from doing so. Most of the time, though, I cried in the night on her breast, for hours, in my way, without tears.

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The pictures on the wall. I walk coolly past them. What convulsions must have racked this man when he painted that picture. And music. I shut my ears to it. How apathetic I have become; how deeply what I have learned has embedded itself in my breast. I am ashamed of these men. They're all defeated, all betrayed, and out of their virtue they have made a need, the need for a woman. Should smash them in battle and stomp them into submission. Poison flows in their veins.

My blood is pure, pure.

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I climbed mountains.

They stand there dazzling in the morning light.

They are overburdened with snow. The snowy mountain stands there like a bride, awaiting praise.

I walk across it. From all sides, from every branch, the glittering icicles break off and fall on me, they tear the hat from my head and run down into my neck. The snow is high; already I sink in it up to my knees.

How happy it makes me, all the riches and beauties spread out before me, and that I can trample them with my blind heels.

I have changed so strangely, since I set out toward other people. Most likely I got carried away.

Oh how people disgust me.

I hate women, I hate, hate, hate them, I could weep with rage over them, the dogs, the damned

bitches. I envy the mad—at least they still believe in their hallucinations. There is nothing left to push me to work, to laugh, to breathe.

Methinks they have corrupted me. So they did poison me after all.

I am so scared. I only want to run and climb. My God, help me.

I climb through the snow.

I realize now that I've lost my way.

Right. I'll sit down in the soft snow. I'll make it down, I won't make it down? I count it off on my coat buttons. The sweet snow.

My God, help my sick soul soon.

THE CANONESS AND DEATH

THE GAUNT gray-haired maiden[1] had pushed the glasses of hyacinths aside and propped her elbows on the windowsill. She sat bent in the light of the snow. Out in the front yard a dazzling white, pierced with footprints, was slowly melting away under the midday sun; thin blackish water trickled around the trees. As the bent canoness watched the blackish water, she suddenly knew that she would soon die.

She took her left elbow off the windowsill, laid her delicate little hands together, pressed her back against the back of the chair. The maiden sat stiffly behind the glasses of hyacinths. When the clock struck, she went to the refectory table, took a bite, and put down her fork. She left the hall. She sat in her room. All day she sat in her room, in a corner, her ruined face turned to the wall. The snowlight falling into the room turned faint; the colors dissipated on the carpet. Two trembling hands raised the cylinder from the lamp in the dark, then the lamp was violently put out again. Clothes fell to the floor. She breathed in bed, haltingly, now quickly, now deeply. All night she lay there with her eyes open. Her face did not move in the darkness. Around midnight, the moon appeared outside her little window. White, it remained there half the night; only when the clock struck half past three did it turn away.

In the morning, she walked with measured steps through the park behind the convent, bent, in her black dress with the narrow sleeves. The maiden walked under the bare trees next to her gangly friend. They spoke now and then, raising wrinkled lids from their eyes, which misted up at the first breath of air. Indifferent sentences were repeated.

When the moon appeared outside her curtained window in the night, the canoness's bed teetered. Her fingers clutched both edges of the bed frame and clenched into balls; she shook, pressed herself into the bed, and groaned often as morning came. Oh, how the lump whimpered, crawled under the blanket, and fell asleep only when it was already light.

The next day there was a disquiet in her actions. She gulped down her meal, kept jumping up, chatted and babbled like never before, broke off in the middle of what she was saying, and fidgeted. She stayed sitting in the dining hall for a long time, with shoulders slumped, doubled over. She did not go back to her room that day. That evening, she asked her friend to spend the night with her, in vain. After that, it was as though someone was pushing the canoness across the threshold. She hastily locked the door behind her, closed the window, sprinkled eau de cologne on the walls, and put flowers, blossoming flowers, on the table and the stove, at the feet of the little picture of the Mother of God in the corner, as many flowers as she could find, white and blue blankets, too, that she had in her cupboard, and draped them over her chairs too. Then she suddenly sat down for a long, foolish, stubborn cry.

At night the clocks ticked in her room. There were two hanging on the wall: One ponderously swallowed the time and bleated every half hour, then it was sated but kept chewing anyway; next to it, the cuckoo clock chuckled, flapped, ran out of breath, and almost tumbled over when it let out its pitiful cry. The canoness jumped out of bed and stopped the pendulum. As she lay unmoving in bed again, the little clock twitched and the face of the big one grimaced. Then she threw on her clothes and ran out the door, into the park. Her eyes were fixed on the black, tangled bushes: "I must die, I must die." Standing by the water that misted in the dawn light, she stared vacantly into space with a flickering gaze. She waded in, with loud gasps and screams, with desperately closed eyes, splashed the water's surface with her little hands, her scrawny hands, suddenly turned around, and fled between the black trees back into the building. The old maiden stood looking out the window. When it grew brighter, there was again a frequent trembling around her mouth, all her limbs shook again, her lips clamped shut, and she fell back onto the bed. But she huddled like a brick in the middle of the bed. Her jaws were clenched. She groaned. Her eyes flashed, now at the window, now at the door. Mutely she pulled the covers up over herself.

On the following days, she walked around quietly, continued to sprinkle her little room with nice-smelling cologne at night, but gradually resumed her old activities. Praying, embroidering, cards. She also sat alone again for long periods behind her glasses of hyacinths. She smiled there, now and then, shuddering deeply. She spoke with the other women even less than before, to the point where they began to talk among themselves about her vain nature. The gaze that ranged over the women at the table was in fact sometimes puzzled, sometimes prickly and superior.

The days grew warmer. Now she would walk for hours down thickly overgrown park paths; wherever she walked, wherever she stopped, a dreaming was walking around. Cried now and then, in a soft, streaming way that sounded like a young song. Then the old maiden looked at the lines in her hands,

wiped her hands across the dry sagging skin of her face in front of the mirror, gingerly felt her haggard breasts with her fingers, moved them around as though rummaging for something. She stood stock-still like that for almost half an hour when she undressed. When she lay down, she would feel chilly again, like before, and she wanted to clutch the bed frame tight, but before long she shifted against the wall, left a little space free next to her, and hesitantly draped her arm over it, then took her arm away again, put it back, it was a game. Arm pressed against her chest, hot gaunt face turned to the empty space on the pillow, neck outstretched. As during the first nights, her barren body shook; soon her fingers probed across the pillow, her lips pursed.

When the green young leaves covered all the paths, she started dressing and grooming herself for her walks: She put on a light blue blouse, held flowers, mignonettes she had cut herself, long-stemmed roses, in her white-gloved hands. She walked more upright, more springily, in the grass. When she was in the thick shrubbery and no one was listening, she curtsied politely, tittered into her flowers, minced around with a sweet little mouth. Yes, she wrote delicate letters on rose paper, full of coy hints, coquettish and playful, opening: “To my dear strict lord, Death”; she held them up to her open window, slipped them under her door at night, buried them in the bushes. The sisters often watched from the building; they never saw whoever it was that the gray-haired maiden was dressing up for. They saw only her, always sauntering and stopping. She walked with a show-offy look on her face past the women leering with curiosity. The sisters said to one another, more and more convinced by the day, that the canoness was bearing sinful cravings, and occasionally they suggested she be expelled from the order.

Meanwhile the spring advanced; it grew warmer and warmer. And one night the old canoness came back to her room from a walk, with red clover she had picked, willow branches, catkins. Her face beamed. She sang to herself in a soft voice, left the door and window open. She put the flowers under the picture of the Virgin Mary. When she had arranged the flowers, she started back in alarm from the picture of the Blessed Virgin, fell to her knees, and prayed. But with a mischievous smile she hung up the branches and leaves above the picture so that the face of the Queen of Heaven was entirely hidden.

She trilled out into the warm spring night with her face abloom, then lay down.

She fell asleep. Woke up in darkness. Brawny footsteps in the room. The bed creaked. In one leap, Death jumped into bed next to her. There was room for him. He grabbed for her knees. She tried to fight him off. Like a country peasant he struck her shoulders with open hands. Then his balled fist fell upon her chest, her body, her body, and her body again. Her lips pleaded. A retch came. Her tongue rolled back in her throat. Her body stretched out.

Then Death stood up and pulled the canoness by her cold little hands behind him, out through the window.

[1] A canoness is a member of a Christian community of women living under a rule but not under vows like a nun. The German is *Stiftsfräulein*; *Fräulein* means girl, Miss, maiden.—Trans.

Part 2

LATE TALES

A FAIRY TALE OF TECHNOLOGY

THIS IS a true story, and one that shows that miracles are still possible, even in the most enlightened age.

There was a little Jewish village in the Ukraine, and a father lived there with his children. It was still before the war. The tsar ruled in Petersburg, but in the Ukraine there was the Black Hand and they ruled too. And one day some people needed money again, and look, here were some Jews, and their businesses had been doing well lately, so people set some stories going around, about Easter, about how a bad word had been said about the pope and a Jew had laughed, the way another one had said something about the Holy Madonna of Częstochowa, and with this and other such items the groundwork was laid, but then the Black Hand built upon these foundations, everything including the fact that the police were celebrating a holiday just then and the commissioner was sitting at the public banquet on just that day. And what will happen, they'll band together and riot, some word has already leaked out but it doesn't help, pogroms will be pogroms, blood flows, but the Jewish people aren't children, blood eventually flows on the other side too, one doesn't let oneself be torn to pieces by wicked beasts.

And a father lived in that village, who had guarded his house very well, very well, and he had had an ax too during the pogrom, and there were probably several people who would have seen that ax—and then the father thought: It's better if we don't wait for the search and the trial, and he upped and left with his family, and because they had to do it in secret, he separated his two big sons and said "Lvov!" and gave them money. But only one did he see again. The other, who already could sing so beautifully, never returned. Not a word was heard from him, not a syllable. The beloved son, swallowed whole by the earth. Father and mother moved to a small town, their relatives did what they could for them, prosperity returned, they got through the war too. But neither father nor mother was ever happy again. Their dear son was gone.

They talked it all over a thousand times. "You were a bad example for him," the mother wailed, "he'll have picked up an ax or a knife too, a Jew should just lay low." "So, I should have let myself get cut down, and all of you with me?" "Ach, there are lots of people back home who are still alive."

Time passed, the mother died, the father got worse, the son supported them, the relatives helped. But the father always went to listen wherever there was singing, and thought, Oh, how my Yitzhak used to sing, what a beautiful, beautiful voice, where are there voices like that anymore today. But that he listened so much and went to concerts was the dispensation of God. Mother had died, she was gone, but the father should know that God still lived and had not forgotten him.

Then the head of the community gave him a gramophone, when he turned seventy, and he had people play it for him, and his eldest son brought him the newest thing too, a radio, with which you could hear from far, far away, wherever there was singing, wherever there was singing anywhere in the whole world, sung by anyone. But his son Isaac was not singing along.

And day after day he listened in on all the voices, so many, such bellowing and braying, and the hits they were recording now, that people danced to.

And one day around noon his radio was playing again and his daughter-in-law was cooking in the kitchen when the door flew open and the old father, yarmulke aslant on his bald head, came out screaming, his eyes were wide, wide, and he screams, "Rosalie, come listen, come listen!" God's sake, what's gotten into him, I'll go get Yankel. "Come listen, Rosalie, he's singing, it's Yitzhak! Rosalie, my child, come listen, Isaac, it's Isaac!" And she had to hold him up and bring him to a kitchen chair, the old man, the music had ended, it was a psalm, now there was a popular song on, she wanted to turn it off, don't turn it off, maybe it'll come on again.

What more is there to tell. They listened to the old man, his son traveled with him to Warsaw, they found the record and on the record was his name, an English name, he was an American cantor, a famous man, they found another record by him in Warsaw too.

And then telegrams went back and forth, and truly, it was Yitzhak. He had gone right to America, had tried to find his parents in Russia but then the war came, and how could he look for them then.

And the radio did this thing, and that is technology, and it led a son back to his father, and both of them know that God lives and is a rock to build upon for whoever believes in Him.

A LITTLE FABLE

ONCE UPON a time there was a continent called Allbark and Nobite, and in it a country called the Kingdom of Tongue-Tied. The sun and the moon shone their light upon it, in their customary alternating fashion, but mighty rivers flowed through and rugged mountains towered above it, giving rise to a sense of the exceptional and heroic. The kingdom was named Tongue-Tied following the wishes of its own people, since there was nothing they respected as much as language. Because of their idolatrous worship of language, they used it as little as possible. Education was therefore directed primarily toward vigorous exercise, business, and sports, and also music, and noise, but with no words or meaning. Language, they taught, was not worthy of a true Tongue-Tiedian; precise thinking was likewise not held in very high esteem. People made themselves understood with looks, short nods, or hand gestures, and deaf-mutes enjoyed great honor throughout the land.

Every city in the kingdom had at least one newspaper, consisting of sixteen white pages and a similarly expressive advertising supplement. The editors were carefully screened but there was hardly a flood of applicants for the jobs, since it was a difficult, arduous task to present the text and advertising in new and interesting ways and keep everybody happy. The familiar ABC letters of the alphabet, as well as the type in the typesetters' cabinets and printing presses, had had to be replaced by the corresponding mutescript, or white-letters; the white color had had to be delicately modulated—snow white, lamb white, egg white, and so on—with whole generations of typesetters devoting their lives to the task, while the sharply edged black-letters of an earlier era were taken out of circulation. These newspapers were read with different-colored eyeglasses—that was all the variety people got. There were mutephones in the editorial offices: When a call came in, a black light on the device blinked against a black background. Trained telephone operators (almost exclusively men; under the new conditions, women were no longer suited to this old occupation of theirs) took down the news, which was at once set in whiteprint and disseminated throughout the country on posters and placards. Crowds of people stood in front of the sturdy placard pillars or lines of lights running around the buildings; bill posters tore down old newssheets and pasted up new ones under police protection. Excitement filled the air, though everyone kept their self-control.

The candor of the historian obliges me to report that this great tradition in the kingdom was eventually carried on almost exclusively by official bodies; the general population gradually fell back into idle chatter. But tradition was preserved in the government's dealings with the people. Gradually, the sacred whitescript (*scriptura alba regia*) and honorable mutespeech came to be, for all intents and purposes, reserved for government matters, taking on a kind of cultic character not unlike that of Latin in the past. Important news affecting the life of the people, negotiations with neighboring states, royal intentions, and suchlike were communicated solely mute and in whitescript, as befit the seriousness of the content. (Once, a new young king felt the need to institute a change: He felt that, instead of speaking mutely and writing in whitescript, people could just as well scream, shout, and sing random words, or print random words in black; but they quickly stopped doing such things and he was removed from office—the old ways were better.) The government had also gotten the people accustomed to filing their complaints about abuses of power in whitescript and mutespeech, which was likewise how such complaints were promptly resolved.

The countries that love to prattle have named their representative bodies "Parlamente"; the Tongue-Tiedian assemblies were called Silencorias. They were held, once the members were elected, in a grand hall across from the ministry. People greeted each other in friendly fashion, drank beer and light tea paid for by public funds, spent half an hour bowing in all directions—to each other, to the minister, to the king's portrait on the wall (the auditoriums were known as "gymnastics halls" from all this bowing, and older citizens were encouraged to run for office for that very reason)—everyone stayed silent, smiled, and looked around, until a bell, rung by the presiding representative, signaled that the discussion was over. There were people who, unfamiliar with the country's way of life, claimed that the royal government was perfectly happy with this arrangement, wanting nothing more than to prohibit speech and then act however it wanted. But reasonable people pointed out that the Tongue-Tiedians had everything other countries had: Order and abuses, justice and corruption, in fact they had even more abuses and corruption than other places so why should they bother going back to speeches and blackprint?

Now the neighboring state to the south of this kingdom was the Duchy of Freedom. And just as people

in the Kingdom of Tongue-Tied respected the word and honored language so highly, those of the duchy to the south celebrated freedom so much that they kept it locked up in an undisclosed location in the ruler's own castle and never let anyone get near it. Once a year, the Freedomards marched in an annual procession to the castle, sang their thundering songs, and praised the prince for protecting freedom at whatever the cost. Then the prince himself stepped out onto the balcony, said that he wanted to tell them all about freedom's state of health, and proceeded to do so. The people could well believe that the prince was serious about freedom, because he set up jails and penitentiaries throughout the duchy as a defense against the attacks on it people were always launching. If they wanted to hear how the freedom they personally had among them looked at the time, the answer was, according to castle employees, that she was a little old lady with a bad cough who walked bent over and spit up into her handkerchief, the duke led her around by the arm, she was practically blind and walked with a cane. She was, to hear several courtiers tell it, not unattractive, down-at-heel as she was. The duke told her all about what was happening in the country as they ate their meals together, and the old lady picked at her food, smiled a melancholy smile, and dreamily said, "What do they still want with me? I don't understand. After all, there's a time and a place for everything. I'm only a prejudice." The duke continued to think of her with respect and deference, however, and saw her as his most valuable possession, the jewel in his crown. He always kept his jails and penitentiaries full in her honor, for where can anyone learn to respect freedom better than there, he said, where they have to do without it. Therefore, everyone had to take their turn passing through jail once; the duke granted no exceptions. And whenever anyone, furious that he'd have to go to jail anyway, committed an actual crime, the duke immediately chopped off his head for being pushy. The Kingdom of Tongue-Tied and the Duchy of Freedom maintained good relations with each other and used to trade a certain percentage of their populations annually, in order to rear as great a race of good citizens and exemplary human beings as possible. These two states lasted a very long time, and it is even possible that they still exist today, but little is known on that topic since our geography and history focus primarily on the stratosphere.

TRAFFIC WITH THE BEYOND

IN THE midsize English city of E., during the war, a spiritualist society finally managed to find an excellent medium who drew large crowds to the society and its events. He was an elegant young man, staying in a sanatorium outside the city to recover from a nervous shock and occasionally relaxing with a few drinks in the local nightclub; it was said he gambled. One day, he was invited along to a private society event, involving table turning, etc., and there, for the first time, and to young Wiscott's own amazement, his mediumistic abilities were revealed. He was rather alarmed, indeed outraged, at how they congratulated him on his rare gift, and in the following days and weeks they had to drag him almost violently from his sanatorium to a session in the city. He tried to take refuge behind his doctor, but the latter himself took a lively interest in the experiments.

The decisive factor was a very respectable sum of money that the society offered him. For Wiscott's uncertain health had kept him from practicing his profession for quite some time—he was an engineer in a factory—and the sanatorium was expensive. So he conceded a willingness to exploit his newly discovered ability in the interests of keeping afloat. Moreover, he was under pressure from his gambling debts.

Wiscott, as soon as he was brought into a spiritualist environment and went into a trance, was another person. We might say he was not a single person at all but several, the potential to be many, depending on the figures from the beyond he made contact with. In this contact with the beyond he completely lost his own personality, melted, and received, like wax, impressions from the other side. It is easy to understand how exhausted he was at the end of his sittings, and how hard it was for him to get used to the process.

His revelations, or performances, if you prefer to put it that way, caused a sensation among the public as well. The society's acquisition of this medium was a good move. Everyone marveled at Wiscott, "the psychic telescope," and wanted to take a peek through this curious tube at least once.

The events proceeded entirely undisturbed for a while, but after the death (or murder) of van Steen, the brewery owner, they took on a tempestuous character and, to get right to the point, came to a sensational end.

Van Steen, a member of the spiritualist society himself, was found dead one morning in a hotel in the city (he lived in a mansion on the outskirts of town), with a gaping wound in his head and his money and all his valuables stolen. The murderer or murderess had had the gall to pay a visit to the victim's mansion afterward, opening the doors and unlocking the locks with the keys the victim had had on his person. Strangely, the thief's interest was drawn not to money or jewelry but to . . . laundry. All the freshly washed pajamas, dress shirts, bathrobes, and towels had disappeared. Even more bizarre was the situation in van Steen's hotel room. There on the carpet lay the fat and jolly brewer: dead, in a pool of blood, and bizarrely decked out. It was like the scene in Puccini's *Tosca* where the heroine, after stabbing the tyrant, piously places candles and flowers around him. Something similar had happened here, except that it was far from an act of piety. On his head van Steen had a paper hat, folded out of a sheet of newspaper the way children do it. Flowers had been put in his hand and more flowers draped over his ears. The most striking thing was that his boots had been taken off and placed upright, next to his feet—one right, one left—and in each boot was . . . a hotel napkin. The windows were wide open, two upper panes had been broken in, and the curtains had been ripped aside at just that height.

The police did not have it easy. First of all, they were wartime replacements. And the bizarre crime had been committed in an old, sprawling, confusingly laid out commuter hotel with people streaming in and out essentially unsupervised from morning until night.

When the police got nowhere, what recourse would more readily suggest itself to the spiritualist friends of the victim than that they investigate the mysteries of the case in their own fashion, aiming their living telescope, Wiscott, at the dead man's ghost? Furthermore, several aspects of the situation made them uneasy. They wanted to ask the brewery owner's ghost to give the necessary explanations himself. If anyone knew what had happened to him, he did. The society duly informed the police of their intentions, and they gave the society their blessing. It was fine with them.

Again, Wiscott balked. They had thought they were giving him a great opportunity, but he was resistant. Would van Steen want to be channeled in the first place? he said. Maybe he wouldn't? Maybe he had good and valid reasons not to want to make a statement about the delicate situation. He could compromise someone, perhaps a lady. Then Wiscott tried to get out of the situation with the following

argument: Clearly spirits had themselves played a role in the murder, as the broken windowpanes and torn curtain proved. This could be a spirit murder. He was afraid to get involved. Finally, he tried saying that he did not like making contact with the recently deceased, and an acquaintance of his at that—it was impossible to predict how the spirit might react. He did not like the idea of an encounter with van Steen, not that he had anything against him. And such a bloodstained ghost too. The society tried to help him overcome his naiveté, but still he balked.

At this point, the rumor that the spiritualists were offering their services to the police reached the public. Naturally the newspapers made a big thing out of it. Then someone turned up in the society's office: one Miss Dutort, a Canadian, Mademoiselle Eveline from the big variety theater in the city, a beautiful and much talked of lady. She asked to be allowed to speak with the medium, Mr. Wiscott, concerning the matter that had been reported in the press. She spoke to the society president, one Mr. Valley, a gray-bearded gentleman who worked for the post office, who had no objections to arranging a meeting in his office, and who had a slight ulterior motive, namely that Wiscott would surely not resist the public when it presented itself to him in such a form. Just before she was due to return that afternoon, Valley remembered with a shock that he had read her name, Eveline Dutort, in connection with the van Steen case: The soubrette lived in the hotel where the murder had taken place, in a room on the third floor, like the brewery owner; she knew him, had admitted to having supper with him often, but had said that she hadn't seen him on the night in question.

The encounter between the two in the society offices went quite strangely. The soubrette, a short, curvaceous, and very flirty specimen of womanhood in a luxurious sable coat, her dark hair uncovered by a hat, stepped resolutely up to the medium. He was sitting comfortably on the tabletop, swinging his legs back and forth, and did not change his position while the president introduced the lady. He nodded at her, uninterested. Valley timidly announced that the lady wished to present Mr. Wiscott with a request.

She: "Mr. Wiscott, I would like to ask you to undertake the attempt to contact the murder victim, van Steen. I ask you most fervently. You know why. But I am innocent. I know absolutely nothing about these horrific events, even though people keep trying to say I was involved."

Wiscott (oily as ever): "Fine. Done."

Valley: "What do you mean, Wiscott? You'll do it?"

He, bowing to the luxurious Eveline with an indefinable smile, announced his decision to her: "Miss Dutort, I think we'll do it— even if it is risky."

With that, he slipped down from the table where he had been sitting and strolled around the room, while the lady gave no sign of leaving, so that after a silent pause there was nothing for Valley to do but ask whether she still had something on her mind. Yes, she said, might she ask to speak to Mr. Wiscott for a few minutes alone? Amazed, the medium crossed his arms, and Valley and he exchanged glances.

"I'm only looking out for myself," sobbed Eveline. "I don't know where else to turn. They're talking about canceling my contract."

"Oh," Wiscott said, gesturing with his hand at the side door. He opened it for the soubrette, who stepped quickly into the society's little library. What took place between the two in there is not known to us, except that Eveline (as Wiscott told the president after the interview) passionately, bringing numerous personal arguments to bear, beseeched him . . . *not* to proceed with the experiment. That's right, now she wanted him not to do it. Of course this only strengthened his resolve.

He left the library looking calm; she emerged with a red face and a bitter expression on it. She cast one last questioning look at his impassive face and rushed off.

That night, when Valley told his friends about the incident, they were uneasy and said that now Wiscott might be biased. He smiled. "Biased? But you know Wiscott. Not a word he says comes from him."

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First session:

Wiscott had dressed with particular elegance and even stuck a camellia—the flower associated with the dead—in his buttonhole, as an identifying mark for the brewery owner, he explained.

When the channeled spirit spoke, it turned out that it wasn't the right one, but a stranger. It seemed to be a man from Glasgow, and he was very polite, asking what time it was and how everyone was doing, and apologizing when he realized that he was not the one they wanted. He picked up his hat and disappeared, with the comment that this had often happened to him.

When they woke Wiscott up, he sleepily remarked that he had already encountered the man many times. He was always standing around everywhere and butting in. Wiscott thought he was a dog-biscuit

manufacturer; the company no longer existed.

The next spirit the medium channeled, equally erroneously, was harder to get rid of than the man from Glasgow. He said he had been waiting a long time and had something important to say. People channeled every spirit under the sun but no one ever paid any attention to him.

They all knew this eager man. He was from E. He said his piece and the protests from the group—that they had gathered for another purpose and had more important things to do than listen to him—had no effect on him. During his life that had now thank God come to an end, he rudely explained, he had taken out a life insurance policy to benefit his sister. The money was explicitly stipulated to go to his sister as her own private property. Instead, exactly as he had predicted, his brother-in-law had pocketed the money. The spirit went on and on about this brother-in-law, using the most offensive and obscene turns of phrase.

Now this brother-in-law—an enthusiastic spiritualist, who had in fact funded the meeting in progress—was there, which was clearly why the spirit had turned up. The living man raised a violent outcry. What did the spirit want anyway. Without him, he never would have been channeled in the first place. He protested against the shameless and unjustified intrusion of the spirit, against the sad disarray of the beyond, against the misuse of the spiritualist society for private ends, etc. It was outrageous to bring up this private matter here, not to mention that the spirit was misrepresenting it in every detail, and he, the living man, advised the dead man to give a little more thought to his posthumous reputation, which was already looking quite a lot the worse for wear.

The excited spirit replied to this barrage in confused and exorbitant terms. When the discussion degenerated into a savage cursing match between this side and the beyond, the president had no choice but to wake up the medium, however unwillingly, and ask him to start over (also in consideration of the police representative there, who wanted to see the murder case dealt with). It was the wrong one again, he said, and however fascinated by spirits one might be, this was one they could do without. Even from the dead, one had the right to expect a certain respect for social proprieties.

But the rage of the brother-in-law and heir was so great, even afterward, as was the back and forth over whether they shouldn't have heard the spirit out after all, since otherwise he could just come right back and interrupt them again, that in the end the medium himself asked to terminate the session. Incidentally, he said, they could see how right he had been to warn them about channeling the brewery owner. They were stirring up a hornet's nest. Still more serious incidents were in store. But if they insisted. . . .

They insisted. For even these failed attempts had made the society's members hungry to learn more about the nature and organization of the beyond, and the medium was clearly in superb form. Things on the other side obviously proceeded much more naturally than one had imagined. For example, said old Valley, the president, they could now see that the spirits stood around in groups on the other side, waiting for someone to bring them news, like people in remote mountain villages. Naturally there wasn't much interchange, at least there hadn't been until now. Certain mix-ups were the result, such as the appearance of the wrong spirits. When mail came for someone, everyone else crowded around and thought there might be something in there for them.

To help Wiscott regain his equilibrium, they scheduled a public session with the usual offerings, which went well. Then came the next session concerning the case of van Steen.

This time he appeared right away. But then something came up that no one was expecting. They wanted to ask the spirit for information about the murder, but he knew nothing—not even that he was dead. That was the limit! All kinds of things had happened at the society's conjurations, but for a spirit not even to know that he was a spirit was something new. The channeled van Steen did in fact act completely lively, behaving exactly how his fellow society members remembered him. When, in accord with the president's wishes, the medium insisted and repeated that van Steen really was a spirit, van Steen demanded they stop playing games with him. He didn't like it, he had a weak heart, jokes like that could kill him.

So they proceeded with caution. After all, what could they do if a channeled spirit had health problems in the middle of a session, maybe even suffered a heart attack? How would they get rid of him? And if he died . . . the medium, with a dead ghost . . . inconceivable. They were learning, and seeing ever more clearly, what wrong ideas they had had about spirits, and how naturally things proceeded in the beyond as well.

They brought up only the fact that, three weeks ago, van Steen "had left the city" (since they had to sidle their way up to the murder somehow).

Yes, he said, that's true, he could no longer stand it in this dirty and depraved backwater.

Now this provoked the hometown pride of several of those present. They wanted to answer back. The

president knew how to keep them under control: He tapped his forehead with his finger, they mustn't think the spirit was all there, he was after all in a very unusual condition.

Then, through the medium's mouth, van Steen told the assembled listeners that he had taken a trip and currently found himself "somewhere else." He said it in a mysterious, arrogant voice: "somewhere else." He clearly did not feel it worth his while to reveal to the philistines here, his former fellow society members, where it might be.

The society president answered politely: That was exactly why, because he had taken a trip and they hadn't had news from him for so long, that was why they had made this attempt to contact him, with the excellent assistance of Wiscott, with whom of course he was well acquainted.

At this van Steen let out a rather contemptuous sniff. Valley had touched on a sore point. As we know, the medium had already said beforehand that he did not feel entirely comfortable with van Steen. Well, van Steen didn't like him either. Clearly an inner debate, a private conversation between spirit and medium, was in progress. They could hear an indistinct whisper. The medium turned and shrugged. He seemed to be having an argument with the brewery owner. How would it turn out? But everything was smoothed over and van Steen, now apparently reconciled to his fate, came out nonchalantly with a strange declaration.

Of course he knew Wiscott, and knew the profession he practiced. But things were not nearly as simple as they all imagined. They probably thought they had channeled him through Wiscott (whom he suddenly started calling his good friend). *They* had channeled *him*? Wiscott needed to just come clean with them. No one had channeled him, the brewer, he didn't let himself be channeled by anyone, especially not in a filthy little backwater like this (he wouldn't stop with that). No, it was the other way around. There, on the other side, this boondocks, E., came to his mind for some reason and he felt like taking another look at the lamentable conditions in which he had spent a small portion of his time on earth, brewing beer, of course, what else, what could the people here do besides get drunk to try to escape their misery. In short, he and a few friends on the other side had conjured the society, channeled them, and here it was and now he wanted to ask a couple of the people present about their condition, their domestic arrangements. He wanted to explain a few things to them, posthumously too, which would not be uninteresting for them and their families.

This caused a great commotion in the society. They were all firmly convinced spiritualists, but only in one direction: For the beyond to channel them was a frightening prospect. Also, several members were leery of the threatened explanations. The door was flung open. Light poured in. While everyone stood up, Wiscott remained seated, in a trance, gesticulating and whispering. It took some time to wake him up; the other side simply had him in too tight a grip. Finally, next to the open windows, Wiscott shuddered, looked around in embarrassment, laughed in embarrassment, and apologized. They felt it was their duty to explain to him what had just happened. They repeated some of van Steen's remarks. Wiscott hummed and reflected: He had had the feeling for a long time that something unpleasant like that was going to happen. It was clear to him that we on this side and they on that side were working toward each other, like people building a tunnel, and so they on that side could easily come to the conclusion that it was they who were channeling this side. All this fit well with the basic ideas and general understanding of the president. The society, incidentally, was called Clear Passage.

Of course Wiscott's remarks only stirred up the spiritualist club's sporting zeal, and they could not wait to come to the next session.

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The time came. The brewer appeared at once, with a jolt, so to speak: "Here we are."

This time van Steen had come with a whole group. Yes, he had brought a gang of spirits with him, and they all spoke through the medium, or at least tried to speak through the medium, who obviously couldn't handle such an onslaught. They talked over one another. Shouts of "Shh!" came from this side and the other side. Van Steen tried to assert himself but couldn't. Incidentally, before the session, with a premonition of what was to come, Wiscott had asked to be freed from his usual armchair and permitted to sit on the more comfortable chaise longue with his back against the wall. There he sat, surrounded by society members, but he soon had to lie down and now he talked, whispered, giggled, and protested as the spirits bade him, now in a higher voice, now lower. It was not always easy to tell the voices apart.

It was obvious to the spiritualists that Wiscott was now a telescope through which primarily those on the other side were looking. Some of them secretly wondered, given the high honorarium Wiscott received and his opulent lifestyle, if he wasn't perhaps selling his services to them on the other side too, the old bastard—and what they were paying him, and how, and with what. As long as he wasn't getting too mixed up with them.

You can imagine what a hodgepodge it was, with both sides wanting to use the telescope, or megaphone, at the same time. Each side made fun of the other, tried to insist on rules and regulations for the traffic. But it did stay within civilized bounds.

Once this first contact was established, they resolutely tackled the question of the murder.

"Who has supposedly been murdered?" laughed the murdered man, quite amused by the earlier to-do. Valley very cautiously conveyed that it was him. He could have spared himself the trouble and been clearer because the spirit didn't notice the hints. He constantly returned to the subject of his trip and thought they were joking with him. He was obviously suffering from a posthumous gap in his memory, perhaps corresponding to the gap in his skull that the murderer had made with a blunt instrument. Now the question was how to break the news to him. Finally, after being badgered repeatedly by his fellow society members, van Steen had to face facts. After a short pause, he said that he was withdrawing to get advice from his buddies.

There was no sign of him for a while. The medium whistled contentedly on the divan and chuckled to himself at something, eyes closed. He seemed to be having a good time, who knows with whom.

Then van Steen reappeared, this time alone. He was sulking, acting like he didn't know a thing, hadn't heard anything, and they had to tell him everything all over again. Strangely, or to be honest stupidly, he asked who he was dealing with. They soon understood why he was acting that way. It was clear from the heckling they could hear coming from the other side—some spirits were lingering nearby. Van Steen was simply embarrassed in the presence of the others in the beyond. He didn't want it known that he had, or ever had had, anything to do with the spiritualist society or with this side at all. It was bon ton on the other side not to have originated from human beings—why this might be, and what it even meant, were actually incomprehensible, of course, since all of them there must originally have been human beings. (Or were there some who had another origin?) In any case, over there they acted across the board like they were the high-class real thing, yet another confirmation that social relations on this side and the other side were the same.

As soon as the spiritualists realized that this was the situation, and that their good old brewery owner was ashamed to have come from a human being—him, an ordinary meat-and-potatoes spirit, the real thing, the fun-loving fellow, him—their mood lifted and they teased the poor creature mercilessly. They greeted him heartily, alluded to his brewery job, which had actually come naturally to him and fit him to a T; his brewery was doing great without him too, by the way. They made reference to various pleasant times they had spent with him here in E., before or after meetings of the society.

Van Steen had no way out: They were too many for him, and behind him the others were making nasty comments and confusing him, and he was trying to hush up his past, using fancy words and talking about theoretical and philosophical things, all total nonsense of course, since that wasn't his style and they were just words he had picked up somewhere, and the speech produced a loud, mocking laugh from his buddies in the society, who naturally didn't understand them at all either.

The spirits gathering behind and around him all this time in ever greater number followed the debate with great attention. They interjected comments now and then and finally subjected van Steen to a cross-examination so intense, such a confusing muddle, that it should have been called a crisscross-examination. They only embarrassed him more, driving him into a corner. Now, under direct interrogation and Yes or No questions, van Steen could no longer deny it: He had to admit that he did recognize certain of the persons present. They emphasized the "re-" in "recognize" several times until at last he had to confess.

Defamed as he was, he lashed out and snapped at the spirits tormenting him: "Fine, all right, it's true! So what if it is? Who are you all then? Where did you come from? Did you hatch from a chicken's egg? Or come from a picture book? Let's hear it. Now it's my turn to ask questions." The response was a thunderous burst of scornful laughter from the beyond, lasting several minutes, in which the whole leadership of the society also took part.

The spirits—we would like to mention here, so as not to present them in a false light—truly did think they were innocent. They considered themselves aboriginal spirits native to the beyond and felt that they had good reason to cut mere travelers, immigrants, passersby down to size. This was because the whole crowd that had crept up behind van Steen and now formed a chorus around him were all extremely ancient. Some came from the Ice Age, some from the time of the early Egyptians. There were people there too who had crossed the Red Sea with dry feet, and one who had died of malaria while building the Great Pyramid.

None of them had any precise memory of this side. And what about the many souls of babies, Indian babies of Aztec origin, who only grew up to normal size on the other side—what were they supposed to remember, what *could* they remember? The memory of the mother's breast or sucking on a rubber

pacifier doesn't last long and is hardly enough to keep a person occupied for eternity, or even for millennia. So all of them—Egyptians, cavemen, and Aztec babies— could laugh in good conscience at van Steen the newcomer, who had been found guilty of running a brewery on the other side and whose head had been crushed in; laugh at him, a blemish on the beyond, a splash of mud from the scurrilous earth.

Being empty, though, as spirits are, they are also curious, greedily hungering for anything new. Shapeless floods of restlessness and sensationalism sometimes inundate the other side. All the spirits present were suffering from one such attack of feverish curiosity, and that was why they had flocked around van Steen and snuck into the session after him.

Now unmasked after all, and his own interest piqued (it was all the same to him), the brewer began to ask the living questions about his situation, while his entourage greedily paid attention. He wanted information about his final days, which they were happy to give him: They had been merry, peaceful, people had spent time with him, maybe he had something he would like to say himself about certain ladies who had attached themselves to him, maybe for reasons of inheritance. Then they moved directly to the murder, told him about the valuables that had been stolen, and about the pajamas and shirts. They heard an astonished and delighted "Ahh!" pass through the crowd of spirits when they mentioned the clothes, and could not understand the reason for it at all. Van Steen stayed on the topic of the murder someone had committed against him, though, and wanted to know more details. He seemed to be in great distress, and cried out, "I should have seen that! I should have been there!"

The detective in attendance as a guest felt that his moment had come, and asked, with a rookie's naiveté, "So who was it?"

He had not taken into account van Steen's condition, still struggling with the news of the misfortune that had befallen him; he felt it as a misfortune and was not ashamed to admit it before his fellow spirits.

"I don't know!" he howled. "What villainy, what infamy. How should I know when I've had a hole like that knocked into my head."

And then he started stammering about how dreadful it was among human beings, how monstrously they treated you, and then that you had to die because of a hole in your head like that. "I will never be a human being again, I swear it, I'll never agree to it again. Such an uncertain existence. One little gunshot and you're dead."

The society sat there, deeply moved. Alas, it was only too true.

They invited the brewer, who by now had cast off all shyness before his fellow spirits, to try a little harder. They for their part were listening to the story so intently that they were as quiet as mice. Maybe something would occur to him which could put them onto the murderer's tracks. They described the fateful hotel room and told him how it had been left. At this, his sadness left him. He had them explain his posthumous adornments in detail. He giggled, and asked about the napkins in his boots several times, at which he gave a hearty laugh.

"Do they think I eat out of my boots? That I was that drunk? We must have been having a good time."

Then he let out an elegiac sigh. The napkins seemed to have reminded him of something. And then, without warning—it was like a bomb going off—he asked about Eveline Dutort! He described her as a charming, attractive creature. He knew the name of the theater where she acted, and even knew (it was strange) the play she was currently acting in. Advertising in the beyond. He repeated her name several times, in a melancholy voice, and brooded. The gaps in his memory seemed to be starting to fill.

"Was it her?" the detective pushed.

"Maybe," the spirit sighed. "Who can know. Maybe it was her. It seems that way to me. To knock a hole like that into someone's head. With a blunt instrument? What kind?"

But that was what they wanted to learn from him.

He thought it over. "A blunt instrument. There must not have been a sharp one handy." And he marveled: "Such a sweet little thing. Not even something sharp."

He withdrew with his silent companions, shaking his head, only to return after a few minutes and thank the people there for the interest they had shown, and also to inquire where they had buried him. He would like to go there right away.

The society was already thinking about rushing out the door to tell the press about the amazing results of their séance, when the medium, still in a trance, gave a signal. There was knocking—a message from the beyond. They wanted to know, over there, when they would be reconvening.

The president said, "Friday." (This was Tuesday.)

On the other side they brusquely thanked him and said one had to strike while the iron was hot.

With that, the session ended. Incidentally, van Steen's rage at the beyond is more comprehensible when we realize the job that this man, who had so loved life and had lived in such high style here, had

on the other side: Garbage collection! That was the usual assignment for a certain kind of new arrival, whose heart still clung to earthly things and who had led a wild life on the other (that is, this) side. Conceited bachelors were given that job as well, and famous luminaries such as scientists, painters, writers, tenors, and generals. For there was garbage in the beyond, stemming from the titanic mass of rotten, shriveled, worthless ideas and preferences that everyone brought with them, gradually threw off, and as it were sweated out of their system—things that no longer had or could have any place in the strict, noble, and spiritual other side. This sad latrine duty was assigned to the merry van Steen. He, and others, had to sweep up this daily rubbish and cart it off to be burned. In his affliction he, like many others, often simply scattered the stuff back down onto the earth.

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They reconvened earlier than planned, though—on Thursday, because meanwhile something happened that made the society decide they needed to proceed more rapidly.

As we recall, van Steen had stated before he left that he wanted to visit his grave in the cemetery, a delight that spirits have enjoyed since time immemorial and that no one had any desire to refuse him. Several members of the society had sprung into action early the next morning and tidied up the rather neglected grave. They brought flowers, and also, to welcome the ghost, their former associate, sensibly added a few fresh bottles of beer from his brewery and a plaque on the top of the grave mound proclaiming to the visitor: “Welcome to the city of your former activities, and bon voyage on your travels to come.”

The next morning, on Thursday, the cemetery watchman reported that an act of vandalism had taken place the previous night in the locked grounds. Unknown persons had forced their way in and destroyed what the spiritualists had so piously assembled. The bottles had been opened and the beer poured out, the flowers scattered. The welcome plaque was gone. The hooligans had also worked their mischief in the area around the grave. While the general public was merely amused by the spiritualists’ activities, and maintained that obviously the cemetery watchman had drunk the beer himself and done everything else to mislead them, the society members were quite sure that ghosts under the leadership of van Steen had done it, indignant at the murder. The meeting was planned for that night.

The proceedings started, and right away there was a predictable technical difficulty: Wiscott, the medium, couldn’t do it. The lines were busy, the roads were blocked. A good dozen spirits were talking to him at the same time. He lay on the sofa, tossed and turned from side to side, covered his ears. Inarticulate sounds came out of him. Finally, tears were running from his eyes and there was nothing to do but wake him up. He made a sorry impression, sitting there like that with his back against the wall, and he whispered that everything was chaos on the other side, they were totally out of hand, what was he supposed to do.

They agreed to have only a limited exchange with the beyond that day, during which they would ask the beings on the other side to try to maintain order, in the interests of both sides. They promised to return the next day with at least two assistants for a full session, in order to satisfy all their requests. At this, they boarded the passenger train once more: commuter line “This Side–Other Side” via Wiscott.

That day, incidentally, Mademoiselle Eveline Dutort, accompanied by a police detective, was on the scene to face the victim. But here it was no mere playacted victim, unlike the one Claudius was confronted with in *Hamlet*. Here, the criminal would face the murder victim in person (if admittedly spiritualized). So there was Eveline, pert and voluptuous, sitting at the table in front of the chaise longue, alternately shy and flirty. Most of the time she acted indifferent to the proceedings, threw coquettish glances, and tittered as she surveyed the strange milieu of the spiritualists, philistine stuffed shirts every last one. In short, she was the very picture of guilt, or at least of complicity, of having taken part in or known about the crime. She cynically awaited the accusation from the beyond. When she greeted the medium with a contemptuous “Pah!,” the detective next to her hissed: “Stop making a fuss, miss.”

The spirits appeared, and as soon as they had made their complaints about the reduced speaking time and the number of speakers, before settling down to comply with the inevitable, they directed their attention, now taking turns, to Miss Eveline. They trained the heavy artillery of their millennia-old acumen upon her. One by one they greeted her: “Hello, Eveline.” “Hallo, darling.” “You little flirt, you too?” “How do you like it here with us, doll?” “Who did you pretty yourself up for so nice today? Who’s the lucky guy?”

Not especially genteel, these spirits. Everyone could see the kind of type they were dealing with from the questions they directed at the young lady. It was a bizarre trial, a jovial court session. Even the detective next to the lady admitted that he had always pictured spirits rather differently. He too had entertained the classical ideas, but now here he was, face-to-face with the reality, crude and potent, and

he grinned in surprise.

Not a single one of the questions the spirits asked Eveline had to do with van Steen's murder. The murdered man himself seemed bashful and hung back, cowed, letting the others talk.

What was it the gentlemen wished to know? Nothing but matters from the domain of reproduction. We might find this amazing, but if you put yourself in a spirit's shoes and circumstances, you'll understand. Ten thousand, fifty thousand years are no small thing. And when someone that old, with only similarly grizzled veterans as companions, suddenly finds himself faced with a sexy, flawlessly dressed twenty-two-year-old young lady, Miss Eveline Dutort from the cabaret in the city of E.?

The gang of spirits was completely in a tizzy. The previous night, led by van Steen, they had behaved like boys, like louts one might say, at the cemetery, furious at the criminal act that had been committed against one of their number (at least we assume they were the ones at the cemetery)—maybe that had livened them up, got them going, worked up their appetite, and now here unexpectedly before them today was Eveline.

If one of our readers should parenthetically ask: How is it possible for spirits, communicating with this side through Wiscott, to see Eveline at all, much less in a dimly lit room, and recognize her as a young lady, and after five or ten thousand years at that? How is it possible? The answer would have to be, plain and simple, that they did. That's what the spirits did. Skeptics can like it or lump it. And by the way, seeing through a medium's closed eyes in a dim room and recognizing someone there is the least that a spirit can do—if it wants to.

As for the spirits' interest in Eveline and questions of reproduction, one must above all take account of their advanced age. Can we imagine, for instance "How lovely it is for the little fishes down in the deep," as a classical German poet once asked? We cannot. We all come from water and descend from fishes, and yet we have no memory—unless perhaps little children do, in the form of their fear of water—that it is not, after all, as wonderful down in the deep as the poet imagines. While the people present smirked and gave the spiritualized old men this or that hint—about the two sexes, the uses to which a lady can be put—Eveline laughed, merry and light of heart. She kept no secrets from them in this regard. But when the seniors pushed for details, a storm of merriment came over everyone. The spiritualists themselves were doubled over with laughter. Only the medium remained serious, a sign of how deep his trance state was.

It soon became clear that the spirits increased their number solely through arrivals from without, from other worlds, from cosmic traffic. Thus when they heard and could not understand the words "father," "mother," "son," "daughter," they wanted to know, first, how this thing happened, and second, why the people on this side didn't increase the same easy way that they did, by simply importing some more—a question, in fact, that made the society members stop and think. They also didn't know how to respond to the spirits' comment that this side must not be able to generate imports because clearly it offered little to attract those from other worlds. This world's appeal was so small that even the people living on earth had no choice after a while but to head out—or else divide, in difficult fashion. The spirits were amazed.

"How can you stand it there on earth? With only each other for company? And the new ones come from just yourselves too?"

The society admitted it wasn't easy.

Spirits: "That must be why you hold spiritualist meetings?"

They agreed happily. They had found a new, convincing, and serious justification for their spiritualism.

The spirits drew further conclusions: "So basically the only reason you come together in the way you've described, and divide, is to fill the gaps that constantly arise when someone leaves for another world."

Nods. "It's called death. No one can avoid it."

They laughed. "No one *can*? That's a strange way to put it. Who would want to? Who could stand staying longer? And then what happens with the new ones?"

"The newborns? We raise them, when they grow up. We educate them and teach them in schools and universities."

The spirits were speechless.

"That's awful," they finally said. "Awful. You, educate them? You teach them. Nothing can come of that. You're just preventing any chance of something new arising."

The spiritualists sat silent. They had never looked at things that way. The spirits wrung their hands (as it were). "You'll never get anywhere. You'll degenerate, there's no other possibility."

And yet they themselves seemed to find this miserable human existence downright appetizing. These old geezers were hardly being honest, considering their enormous interest in Eveline.

"This whole maneuver of reproducing," the eager gentlemen suddenly interjected into the debate, "it's all clearly just something you invented to overcome the monotony of life there on earth."

“You’re right!” Eveline cried out. “You’ve hit the nail on the head! It’s true. That’s why we have love.”

And she positively went into raptures and had the audacity (but then she was an actress and dancer, and used to self-exposure) to paint an intoxicating picture of love for the spirits, via Wiscott, in front of all the serious men and women of the club and her detective. Love, she said, was among the most worthwhile, pleasant, interesting, and exciting things that ever happened on earth, which truly would be, without it, deadly dull.

The elegant medium at this point violently tossed and turned on the chaise longue and cleared his throat in such a way as to, one might say, put the brakes on. Eveline noticed. She provocatively cleared her own throat. Then van Steen the brewery owner suddenly came forward to ask, after an incomprehensible murmur, as though he didn’t know anything, as if blind, whether the Miss Eveline he had named was present at the current session investigating his murder and was ready to make a statement.

The detective answered energetically, “She’s right here.”

Van Steen groaned. “Knocking a hole like that in someone’s head.”

Everyone pricked up their ears. The crime was on the table. Eveline wanted to begin her defense straightaway. But the detective, noticing this, pushed her back into her chair and hissed, “Wait until you are asked a question.”

She screamed, “Let me go!”

The brewer, tragically: “A hole like that. Even now I can’t remember anything. I’m still totally confused.”

Laughter came from many sides; the poor medium could voice it only with great difficulty. The beyond was unmercifully amused at the crazy behavior of their colleague. One of them yelled “Welcome to this side!” and just then an object flew across the room and landed by the door. Because it was so dark and no one wanted to interrupt the session, it was impossible to investigate what it was.

The teary-eyed (or teary-souled) spirit of the brewer: “Yes, they hauled me to the cemetery and buried me.”

That was more than the beyond could bear. Their laughter positively tore the medium apart. The lady, the accused, kept shouting interruptions, refusing to be calmed down, while the brewer kept groaning, and before long several spiritualists lost patience and took Eveline’s side against her sentimental accuser, who had nothing substantive to offer. Naturally, the spirits took her side as well. In so doing, they broke the agreement they had made at the beginning, to talk one at a time, and the medium was soon in a bad state. He raised his arms, he couldn’t follow, the incredible confusion of laughter and cries of protest was unbearable. The whole beyond must have gone completely crazy, due to Eveline, or van Steen. They were all at each other’s throats. The medium shrieked in despair, and there was nothing to do but break off the session that had begun so auspiciously.

And what was lying on the floor by the door? The welcome plaque from van Steen’s grave. The spirits had retrieved it.

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Let us now, before we proceed to describe the course of the last two sessions and thereby reveal the murderer, arrange the various incidents, observations, and revelations of the sessions into a general picture of conditions on the other side. This can only be a rough sketch, because the material we have to work with is relatively limited, and because with everything the spirits say we have to allow for their great mendacity. Taking all that into account, we can still arrive at the following:

Upon leaving this side, the spirits lose more and more of their solidity along with their bodies and grow ever lighter and thinner over time. It is a process of advancing emaciation that takes place quickly, because there what matters are not years, as with us, but decades, even centuries. For the older habitués of the beyond, making plans for the next millennium is not at all unheard of.

When we speak of emaciation, what we mean is the loss of all substance, including memories, ideas, and thoughts. The beings grow emptier and emptier, or in other words: more spiritual. From our point of view, this is obviously a process of shrinkage, a kind of increasing stupidity. We can safely speak of it as advancing idiocy, ending in absolute airheadedness.

Now since, along with their bodies and other substances, the spirits lose all the fluctuations and distractions of earth, air, and water, it is easy to imagine how boring their lives are there, and appreciate the merciful dispensation of Nature that speeds up time for them, making it pass at an accelerated tempo, a gallop. The spirits can thus count on some event befalling them at least every few centuries, or over the course of a millennium.

In the beginning, freshly arrived from earth, they frolic around lustily indeed. Later, when none of

them notices anything about the others, when nothing and no one makes any demands on them whatsoever or disturbs them at all, they sink into a kind of dolce far niente, a state of laziness and sluggishness, which necessarily leads to the blunting of all interests and feelings; a condition of gentle apathy, mixing benevolence with impotence, in which one can only forgive. At that point one enters the ranks of the advanced spirits.

The wise ones who care about nothing anymore slowly rise to the higher levels, the sphere of the beyond known as the influential ruling circle, where lullabies constantly resound and one turns one's head only rarely, to sniff out if anything is going on down in the world, and if so, to criticize it.

This, then, is the explanation for certain things one notices in spiritualist meetings. What do these beings who have crossed over to the other side, from whom we expect a deepening and relaxation of all their abilities, especially of thought, actually have to say when they are channeled? They accept the greetings of an uncle or aunt; as husbands, they give their widows information and advice that is rarely accurate; they inquire after relatives who happen to be in the room just then. We would have expected something more from an astral being, something a little more metaphysical. Here in this spiritualist club as well, the members sat around Wiscott and would have been delighted—curious as townsfolk are—to hear some authentic report on the "four corners of the world" or what a "Hyperborean" might think about life in E. But Nature does not accommodate our wishes.

If the spirits insist on being native to the beyond, it is not just from vanity. The seniors truly no longer remember a thing about the terrestrial peregrinations lying so far behind them. It is therefore considered bad manners to have anything to do with any of it, and the new arrivals are drilled, in the few schools that have been established there (or that could be established, given the scarcity of teaching personnel), to honor the lofty mindless monotony of the elders as the pinnacle of what is to be striven for. Anyone caught reflecting and remembering is arrested and transported to the respective temple of punishment, of which there are four, one for each of the compass points. There they are forced to study a page of theosophy, after which they quickly give up thinking altogether.

This, then, is our account of the condition and nature of the spirits, to which must be added their hypocrisy and lies at every stage. For, though the centuries there roll past like nothing, the rulers remain greedy and keep their sumptuous tastes, a fact their morality compels them to hide.

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What a relief it was, therefore—to return to our story—when spiritualism arose on earth and agreed to meet with at least some spirits. And what excitement, in certain circles of the beyond, when word got out that the freshly arrived van Steen had been summoned to appear as a witness in a criminal proceeding, his own murder case. How they threw themselves at him—shamelessly, one might say. This was just the kind of thing they were waiting for. Gossip and arguments were running wild in the whole lower beyond, and suddenly, before the very eyes of the rulers sunk in torpid wisdom, there was a kind of emancipation. A large group of spirits openly sympathized with van Steen and urged him to energetically pursue his case. Naturally they only wanted a bit of fun, hence the excesses at the cemetery and their throwing the welcome plaque at the human beings' feet, as much as to say: You crooks, you murder one of us and so condemn him to this lousy afterlife, and then you think you can fob him off with a plaque!

Since the afterlifers realized that the rail line to this side was overloaded, and since they had no desire to take turns single file, they had the same thought as the spiritualists. They demanded more connections—a doubling and tripling of the line.

The loudest voice was one Nulpe, from the Stone Age, who demanded that they wrest the whole operation out of the spiritualists' hands and take over themselves, first for the sake of justice, and second—but the second reason remained unstated, it was self-explanatory in this circle: because then they could clown around more. Nulpe reminded his fellow sufferers how backward it was in the beyond: No one ever tries to do anything here. We molt like birds, leave our nice bodies behind on earth, then stroll around in astral bodies, only to finally end our days as pure spirits. Is that really such a worthy goal? Humans complain all the time about their existence, true, but what about us, with our astral bodies? Nulpe railed against the beyond, said it had totally gone to seed. The spirits lay around doing nothing and, despite their burning curiosity, could not make even one contact with earth.

This tirade had real results.

Four members of the society, all older individuals, although obviously nothing in age compared to Nulpe or the other astral beings, two ladies and two gentlemen, simple folk with modest incomes whose only source of intellectual stimulation was spiritualism, felt compelled to admit to one another and their delighted president that they could feel something in their body parts, it was unclear what—an agitation, a compulsion—no, it wasn't love—more like. . . . And they said that they could (they thought they could)

fall into a trance! Their batteries were being pumped full, so to speak. They were prepared to work at no cost alongside the highly paid medium. Nothing could suit the president better, after two older mediums had already demanded higher fees. We can see here the workings of the conspiratorial spirits.

And in fact, when the time for the big session came and the light was turned off, first the professional, Wiscott, fell into a trance and then, on either side of him, several other individuals. This frightened the rest, the uninitiated, who were worried that they might suffer the same fate. Valley calmed them down with a gesture.

The suspense grew. Eveline was there with her detective, and she opened her eyes wide and pricked up her ears.

She had good reason for her nerves. The big guns were being brought out against her. For now all five of the people who had entered a trance started talking at once, led by Wiscott. The more they spoke, and the harder they were to understand, the greater the restlessness among the non-spiritualists. They were overcome with agitation. They felt that the trance state would spread to them, they would be unable to resist, they too would start talking and talking, heaven knows what they would say.

After extensive discussion, the astral beings under Nulpe the caveman's leadership had decided on a set marching order for their first group contact with this side. They had already drunk a toast to the opening of a new line, in spirit fashion, with copious gulps of air.

Nulpe had chosen as his speaker one of the amateur mediums, Schnüffel the haberdasher, who was sitting directly across from Eveline. As a result, Schnüffel now had to lean across the table and utter strange and sweet words to the lady, on behalf of the venerable Nulpe. These words were, needless to say, not the kind one would have expected from someone spiritualized to such a high degree. Schnüffel's remark, or that of the graybeard Nulpe, apparently a kind of compliment common in Stone Age times, had to do with the lady's well-developed bosom.

At this the other mediums, including the two spiritized ladies, burst into laughter; the president himself guffawed but immediately called for order. They stifled their laughter, fidgeted on their chairs, and managed to stare stiffly, unsmilingly straight ahead.

When the lady's face reddened under this snuffling, admittedly in the dark, but she did not reply—she didn't, in any case, rebuff the amorous caveman—Nulpe struck up a conversation with young Eveline (the spirits represented on this occasion were all men; the scent of van Steen's story had attracted almost exclusively gentlemen). Nulpe asked how she felt on earth, whether her racy charms went over well enough here. He was also curious if she liked to travel, and when she said yes, he recommended the exquisite landscapes of the beyond and praised them to the skies. He offered his services as a guide, should the occasion arise.

The beyond, he bragged, was beneficial for every kind of health. There had been no sicknesses there for millennia. That was due to the landscape, the wide open spaces, where everything was airy, ventilated from without and within. And everything beautiful that had to be hidden under clothes on earth could there be borne openly, risk-free.

The old man from the Stone Age, horny as a young goat, seemed to want to entice the young lady to approach his state (or him), although he neglected to mention, and had probably forgotten, that they have no bodies on the other side.

Then one Depp from Upper Egypt, Tutankhamen's dynasty, jumped in and hit on her even more crudely and obviously. Everything was as if planned to attack Eveline.

During this unusual conversation, the room grew more and more agitated. The session was losing ever more of its scientific and/or criminal-justice character, especially as a consequence of the conspicuous behavior of the four assistant mediums, who, under astral influence, periodically emitted inarticulate sounds such as "Hawt" and "Hu" and "Hooah," which at first meant nothing to anyone. They also stammered and grunted. This enthusiasm leapt across to other members of the society. And during the rising and falling tumult there suddenly appeared an optical phenomenon in the middle of the table. A dazzling flame shot up, flickered, and went out.

In its light, the master medium, Wiscott, could be seen lying on the divan with an ecstatic expression on his face, as though listening to something far away. (Incidentally, in the earlier sessions too, mysterious shining bands of light had sometimes appeared around him.)

Wiscott moved, raised his arm, and cried out in delight, "Oh, they're dancing, the astral bodies. The spirits are dancing."

Truly, they had set themselves in motion to pay their respects to the charming Eveline.

And now Wiscott, too, gave off rhythmical noises. First he, and then the nonprofessionals, began to clap their hands in rhythm.

The astral beings, the ancient ones, danced—invisibly to earthly eyes, a tribute paid by the other side

to this, or more precisely a tribute paid by indestructible old men to the Eternal Feminine, the whole thing a ballet in honor of the opening of a new transport line, and, to look at it in crudely materialistic terms, excessive behavior attributable to immoderate air-drinking.

Some of those present, carried away, literally heard the bones of the spirits knocking and their joints cracking as they danced. But these were auditory hallucinations, since there was nothing there that could knock or crack. They were ether from head to toe, but with more than ether on their minds.

The co-mediums were counting merrily "One, two, three," a dance rhythm, like that of an earthly polka, when suddenly Wiscott cried out in amazement, "They're wearing pajamas! They're dancing in pajamas."

No one could believe it. This was sensational, it went against every theory. The people craned their necks, opened their eyes wide so that they could see something too. Only Eveline, who probably realized her time was running out, had put her hands over her face and collapsed on the table. It looked as though she was crying. But no one paid any attention to her. Everyone wanted only to see the spirits, dancing in pajamas.

And then there was a rustling noise by the door—above the table—behind the sofa—in the opposite corner of the room.

People recoiled in shock. They turned around. But they couldn't make anything out from their seats and were not allowed to stand up.

Then Wiscott groaned loudly, and they were afraid, because on top of everything the spiritualists' hand-clapping and counting was heading in an orgiastic direction. So people sprang to their feet and hurried to turn on the lights and wake Wiscott out of his deep, too-deep trance.

The first thing they noticed, though, when the light came on in the room, were . . . two pairs of pajamas thrown across the table and others by the wall, in the corner behind the sofa.

The policeman took immediate action. He confiscated the retrieved objects, inspected them, and read, to the horror of everyone present, the initials monogrammed on them: "H.v.St." Henrik van Steen! They were the murder victim's stolen pajamas!

No one had understood who would want his pajamas. But it was them. The spirits had taken them. Apparently they sometimes wore pajamas in the beyond, maybe at parties or festive occasions such as séances.

The detective had already developed a feel for the other side in the first session; he did not have much of one for this side. He took all the retrieved items of clothing, bundled them together, and asked those present to maintain the strictest silence about the session. It was clear, the new initiate said, that they were on the right track. They now possessed conclusive evidence. He did not inform the laymen what this evidence was conclusive of. The case could now be completely solved without any further contribution from the beyond, he announced.

With that he dragged Miss Eveline, wailing and lamenting, out of the room, to keep her under police supervision until the next session. He was convinced that she would try to escape the impending resolution of the case by running away, which would surely implicate her as accessory or conspirator.

But the medium, Wiscott, was placed under police supervision as well, in his case obviously only so that they could be sure he was safe and that no one was trying to influence him.

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As one might well imagine, all the society members arrived in a state of the greatest suspense the next evening, which was to be the last in connection with this case and in fact the society's last altogether. Up until that point, the sensational events of the previous session had successfully been kept from the public.

Wiscott and the co-mediums promptly fell into a trance. Eveline had been dragged in by the detective. She looked furious. Upon catching sight of Wiscott, the tender young thing wanted to pounce on him like a tiger and had to be restrained by the officer and pushed down into the chair next to him. She showed more and more clearly how afraid she was of the unmasking to come.

To the irritation of everyone eager for a quick, dramatic denouement, the first to appear was the harmless man from Glasgow, the inevitable dog-biscuit manufacturer. He looked around quietly and politely asked what time it was. They told him, whereupon he left without further ado.

In his wake came the fellow they all knew, of course, the one with the inheritance and the life insurance. But he wasn't ready for the reception he met with this time. He had barely opened his mouth and been recognized and started cursing at his brother-in-law's intrigues and betrayal when he was shouted down from all sides. Intimidated, he sullenly withdrew. After that reception one could be sure that he wouldn't be showing his face again too soon.

But anyone who thought that they were ready to get back to the case of van Steen was mistaken. It

seemed as though the astral world had opened its floodgates (or maybe it was the garbage collectors?) and let loose its restless spirits upon the human world. A suicide showed up who wanted to be allowed back to life at any cost. He said he had killed himself by mistake. It turned out, he had heard, that the situation with his bride actually wasn't what he'd thought at the time, based on what she'd told him. She still loved him, she was only playacting a little. The suicide was thus erroneous. What were they supposed to do about that?

Before they could figure that out, someone else came forward to make a fuss and level a collective accusation against this side in its entirety. He said that twenty-five years ago, in Bosnia, in Sarajevo, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, when everything went crazy, he had been run over. They had started a gigantic war over the archduke, but him they had simply tossed in a cart and dragged off to the side of the road.

What did he want then? they asked him. Were people supposed to start a war for his sake too?

"Why not?" he cried. "What's justice for one is justice for another." And he bellowed furiously. "The entire world of the living is unjust."

And then someone else appeared, and someone after that. No one could have dreamed of such a thing. It was like a reverse Resurrection, an homage to the much maligned earth here from those who had lost it.

Finally, the main entourage from the day before came dancing up. These astral beings were still in the most cheerful mood. Due to the time difference, the hilarity of the previous day continued there.

They might possibly have also been imbibing more air.

Nulpe, the elder, once again directed his obscenities and double entendres to Eveline from the mouth of Schnüffel the haberdasher, himself a dashing fellow. But when the lusty caveman once again proposed she pay a visit with him to the beyond, she answered, furious, with a scornful remark that naturally made perfect sense for human beings: "The beyond? You numskulls! Leave me alone with your beyond. I'll end up there soon enough."

"It can never be soon enough," whispered the seducer, the deeply mendacious Nulpe, painting a picture for her of the idyllic life on the other side, especially the universally practiced nudism, which was probably his main focus.

She was not in the mood for jokes though. She pounded the table. "What do you mean by that? What do you all think is going on here? The liberties you're taking! Won't someone finally get this pig off my back please?"

The detective next to her liked this new tone. He wanted to go for broke, and whispered to her, "Ask him: Why do you wear pajamas when you dance? Are you aware that these are stolen pajamas, initialed H.v.St.? Nice spirit world. Where did you steal them?"

Eveline took the bait. She asked, "Why are you pestering me? You're dancing, hogwash, you just want to attack me. If you really are a spirit, how old are you? Aren't you ashamed to act so rude in front of strangers? And throw stolen pajamas around? Where did you get those pajamas? Who gave you the keys to van Steen's mansion?"

Eveline—to the extent that she was offended at all that the astral beings were dancing in pajamas—didn't know that they had no choice but to dress in light clothing: shirts, pajamas, table napkins, or, when they could find any, paper towels, best of all tissue paper, which obviously has the disadvantage that it makes a loud crackling noise, which offends those on this side.

What an oppressive silence Eveline's questions produced. What contrast to the merry hullaballoo of the day before. The spirits, rejected as men and on top of that accused of burglary, sulked. They wanted to give the human they had propositioned another chance. That was why Nulpe, after a short consultation, came forward for one last push. He petted Eveline, as it were—called her a beauty, a wonderful, full-bosomed creature currently putting her charms on show on earth to the delight of many. Why would she want to deny them to astral beings who only wanted to bring her into the astral climate where she would flourish and thrive like a woolly mammoth, a wild boar, an ichthyosaurus.

But the little soubrette had their number. She was done playing games. The day in custody, when she had had to call in sick to the theater, had ruined her whole mood. She shouted across the table, "You don't know who you're dealing with! But you'll find out. If you're playing with me I can play too." —A strange thing to say. Who was playing with her? The spirits were serious. Anyway, those on the other side understood the harsh tone she had adopted and reacted accordingly.

All the mediums sprang into action. They shook their heads, whispered, murmured. They murmured darkly, frightfully darkly. It sounded dangerous. They croaked and quacked. One medium cackled, seemingly possessed by a prehistoric chicken. The Stone Agers' feelings had cooled down to Ice Age levels. In a flash, the other side had formed a united front, led by the vengeful Nulpe, who suggested that

they would be happy to return to the item of business on the program, if that's what the lady really wanted: investigating van Steen's murder.

Depp, from Upper Egypt, delivered a statement along with another astral being manifesting herself for the first time only now: a certain Mrs. Nebbich, the mother-in-law of one Omai-Omi, a Damascus donkey driver known for his sense of humor. Heaven knows what she was doing here. She'd been dead only a few centuries and stuck her nose in everywhere. In any case, the two of them, in the name of many of their peers, stated the following: One of their number, during a visit to the world of human beings—that is, a traveler under the protection of hospitality—had been the victim of a shameful, murderous deed. They were speaking of their venerable compatriot Süffel, alias Schnurzel, who among human beings, to stay incognito, had called himself van Steen. Someone had smashed in his skull with a blunt instrument in a hotel room on this side—a criminal act with which the high-bosomed lady before them was connected. That was their accusation.

With that, the spirits sat down or fell silent.

Omai-Omi's mother-in-law added one more screech, from one of the female co-mediums: The beyond knew everything, Eveline shouldn't try anything, she couldn't fool the beyond.

Incidentally, Madame Nebbich kept repeating the name "Nebeltrine," which was what Eveline would apparently be called in the beyond when her time came.

Then the rest of the hangers-on appended their own threats: Justice would be done, compensation would be demanded, Süffel had incurred enormous costs for the trip. In the future, they declared, they would protect their travelers so that the other side would lose any desire to lay hands on them.

The chairman respectfully interjected that such peaceful and law-abiding collaboration was just what the society wanted as well.

Eveline, seeing herself as Nebeltrine already, seemed to be on the verge of a breakdown. She cried and begged to be left in peace at last, she had nothing to do with the case. But the detective who had cunningly tricked her into asking her question took his handcuffs out of his bag and gave them an enterprising jangle.

"No handcuffs, no handcuffs," she shrieked, aghast.

The detective: "Then confess, you." He always spoke rudely to suspects. He was a substitute officer and her confession could help get him a permanent position.

At this point, the president of the society felt moved to proceed himself to a direct questioning of the brewer's spirit: "Schnurzel, Süffel, remember: On the occasion of your visit to this side, on the night of your murder, which we most deeply regret, were you in the company of this lady, Nebeltrine?" (She screamed that she was being turned into spirit form right out in the open.) "Did you also visit her hotel room, once, often, specifically on the day in question?"

"What do you mean, what question?" Mrs. Nebbich rose up from the background. She had difficulty understanding what was happening and was also hard of hearing; the president had to shout to explain it to her. Then he added one last question: "Who was responsible for decorating the hotel room like that, and what does it mean?"

The spirit, via Wiscott, seemed reluctant to answer. Finally he came out with an answer as clear and unambiguous as one might hope for. He had wanted to protect Nebeltrine, who had wronged him bitterly, he said. But now he would let all consideration fall by the wayside. She should pay. She should be punished for her scandalous deeds.

"Yes, I was with her on the night of my last day visiting you. I was in a good, in fact, a downright giddy mood."

Now this was clear testimony, an actual fact. She had denied it.

"Shh," snarled the substitute policeman, who now felt very sure of his future. He pulled her closer and closer.

At this there was a pause. The spirits, as though overwhelmed by the statement that had just been made, snored very loudly via the four assistant mediums. Maybe the spirits too were resting and readying themselves for a new attack.

But Eveline screamed into the suspenseful pause, "That villain, that liar, it's not true! I don't know what he's trying to do and what he'll say next! I'm innocent! I have an alibi and I can prove it." (But she couldn't just then.)

Schnurzel/Süffel/van Steen: "Oh can you? You dare to say so? What haven't you dared to say in your life? The lies you've told to my face, the wool you've pulled over my eyes, the people you've run around with, and you could always prove an alibi."

He was in a furious state. A strange, grinding, this-worldly sound came from Wiscott. You could feel that this spirit had been torn from life very prematurely, before he had settled the score with this lady—

and who knows, maybe she had beat him to it by killing him, alone or with an accomplice.

It was a relief when someone from the oldest cohort in the beyond spoke up, in a deep, sonorous voice, to suggest in a conciliatory tone that the hearing should proceed more calmly. They should let the full-bosomed lady speak without hindrance. Force was not one of the other side's methods.

From the secondary mediums, from the peanut gallery as it were, the spirits grunted their approval.

Now Wiscott, in the name of the insulted beyond (unclear on behalf of which being), invited the lady, whom he stubbornly insisted on calling "full-bosomed," to say what she wanted to say, without fear or shame, about the events of that fateful night. Perhaps, during her intimate time with van Steen (since revealed to be Schnurzel/Süffel), a third and entirely unexpected, unwelcome person had forced his way in and surprised them? Perhaps a male person? Who had then taken part in the murder? Someone who, perhaps, still found himself here in this city, perhaps even in this very room? "Out with it, Nebeltrine," he hissed.

The thrill-seeking astral public applauded. "Nebeltrine should speak, let Nebeltrine speak!" Above all, naturally, the lusty caveman.

The president turned to Süffel and urged him not to be afraid either, and to say everything that had happened that night, and with whom—clearly, he now recalled more details than he had before.

"I sure do," snarled Schnurzel/Süffel, and he barked out a contented laugh. He remained discreet.

She waited a moment at first, to see if he would say more, then let fly and shouted: Go ahead, let him try it, she would hear his accusations out. She still said she could prove her alibi—but what about him? How about the pajamas? She pounded on the table. "Who dropped van Steen's pajamas here? You think it was me? Who stole the pajamas?"

With van Steen addressed so directly, van Steen/Schnurzel/Süffel's reaction made Wiscott flinch and twitch. This could wake Wiscott from his trance. The society twitched en masse. What was going on? What were Eveline's mysterious words getting at? Could the spirits themselves really have committed the murder, with a blunt instrument that had naturally then disappeared—in anger, maybe in envy of their traveling compatriot (the curtain torn at the top, the broken window, spoke in favor), the whole thing merely an internal affair of the astral realm? Then, after the murder, the spirits had absconded with the laundry for their dances. It all made sense.

Eveline shouted across the table, "And the shirts? You think I wear men's clothing? And that I decked out van Steen too, all by myself? Tell us, let's hear it. If others can make threats, I can too."

Now this, addressed to the spirits, was certainly sensational. The beyond fell into a worried silence. They did not make a sound. The spiritualists' hair stood on end. Who was lying? Spirits were tricky, but this, such treachery.

The sonorous voice of Depp, from Upper Egypt, spoke up: The other side acknowledged, with indignation, the charges leveled by the full-bosomed lady against John Doe of the astral realm. They had already wanted, simply for the sake of justice, a rapid clarification of the murder of a harmless traveler. Now they had to press for the resolution of the case without regard to all the formalities. The beyond, accused of active or passive participation in the crime, requested that Schnurzel/Süffel, known while traveling as van Steen, now face Nebeltrine directly.

What followed next happened fast.

One being, calling itself the Supervisory Board, came forward to demand that the proceedings be closed to the public, as endangering public morality (a harsh blow for the gleeful old men from the Stone Age, the Ice Age, etc.). The Supervisory Committee moved that everyone except Wiscott, the interpreter, and the two parties, Schnurzel/Süffel and Nebeltrine, leave the room and await the result of the tête-à-tête between the murderess and her victim. The president, after a short discussion with the man next to him, a huckster named Weisskäse, decided that the group should stay in the room and the confrontation take place without witnesses (or a judge) in the side room. The judge had to be excluded too—he was part of the public, and they wanted to make sure not to soften the confrontation between the two parties in any way.

At once, Eveline jumped up, not to be held back. The triumphant substitute detective, gripping her arms tight, brought her to the side room. The spiritualist leaders, Valley and Weisskäse, carefully led Wiscott, in a deep trance. Exhaling deeply once everything had been accomplished, they returned to the meeting room. The man from the police shut the door with an energetic slam behind the dead man and his cunning murderess.

The society members sat gray-faced around the table, facing the medium's empty divan. So, now van Steen had her. As long as it remained nothing more than a confrontation between the two. As long as no one took revenge. It had gotten quite late, it was almost midnight. The substitute detective expressed his satisfaction by frequently clinking the handcuffs. The gray-bearded Valley had been unusually dejected

and jumpy all evening. When Eveline had attacked the spirits, he had shown signs of outrage. Then, when the spirits via Wiscott had made their request to exclude the public, he seemed no longer to understand anything, and he raised his arms helplessly before giving in. Now he sat there sunk in thought, visibly worried, for what had become of his magnificent railway project, with an incident like this and the reciprocal accusations of the two sides? He looked anxiously at the closed door—and every member of the society was thinking the same thing as him: Eveline, the pretty, risqué little thing, assaulted by the raging spirits, done in, jerked into the Nebeltrine state by force. Who could keep watch over the spirits now, who could close off the room to that public?

Not a word was spoken in the séance room, which had now been turned into a waiting room. Around the table, the assistant mediums bleated, cackled, and giggled, most likely occupied or possessed by a new set of spirits, who were apparently here as reporters.

Things dragged on for a long time in the side room. At first they could hear the medium's soft, faltering voice, then (horrors) a slap and then another, a cry from Eveline, and then nothing—silence, deathly silence. Now it was on. The reporter spirits cackled eagerly.

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What happened in there, while all of the co-mediums and some of the society members too (not the wakeful policeman, or Valley, on tenterhooks) were snoring deeply in the séance room, and one could hardly speak of a spiritualist session anymore—its serenity was more like that among the higher astral ranks—what happened in there?

As soon as the policeman, certain of victory, shut the door behind the furious Eveline and she found herself alone with Wiscott, grinning and nodding at her from his seat, she yanked him up by his jacket buttons and shook him back and forth. He tried to placate her. She gave him a couple of mighty slaps, which were heard in the next room, and when he asked her to calm down (nothing more), she drove him into a corner of the room with a series of thumps in the ribs, and there, with him literally up against the wall, their confrontation took place.

The voluptuous little creature Wiscott had before him was acting like a fury. She had no need to be transported to the spirit world to become one.

How did he have the nerve to attack her like that in front of those people? Full-bosomed lady? (He received another blow to the chest.) Voluptuous charms? Nudism? (Shoves in the stomach.) And her name? Nebeltrine!? (He turned away as the blows rained down.)

While crouching to present a smaller target, he answered: None of that was him, it was all the spirits.

At that she grabbed him by the hair and hit his head against the wall, and when he turned around, gave him a kick. Wiscott responded to all this with very soft squealing noises, which did nothing to affect the termagant. She was mad.

Then she took a step back, so that he could recover, but she didn't let him get away; instead, she started in again: What was he thinking, bringing the pajamas? Didn't he realize that that would necessarily incriminate them? Was he that much of an idiot?

"Incriminate me?" he grinned. "It was the spirits."

She had had enough of his ears, those sensitive organs on either side of the human head. She crumpled the cartilaginous objects in her hands like paper. He went down again, onto his knees; she did not let go of his ears, and he crept along the floor.

She: "And you're wearing his shirts, in broad daylight, in front of all those people."

He: "They're new silk shirts, Evie. No one will notice anything here."

She: "You have enough shirts. I would have bought you some."

He: "Why throw away money like that."

She had let him go. She looked at him with tears in her eyes as he stood there rubbing his red ears and tugging at his jacket. She reached behind her for a chair and sat down. "Tom, we're lost. Why did you do it?"

He pulled out his hand mirror and smoothed down his brown hair, which she had mussed. "Lost? I'd like to see that."

"Why, why did you do it, Tom? What have I ever done to you? We should have run away a long time ago, or said the whole truth about how it happened."

He grabbed her by the shoulder, looking anything but friendly. "Why did I do it? You have to ask? To give you a little warning. Evie. Do you deny you were sitting on that fat brewer's lap when I came into the room and surprised you?"

"He had pulled me onto his lap. He was already drunk."

"No excuses, Evie. He's not the first man I've found you with like that, or close to it."

“I’m not a nun and never said I was. I can’t lock myself up in jail. And if someone gives me presents, who am I accepting them for? Who gambles and bets all the time, me or you? Who comes to me every week and shows me his empty pockets? And, Tom, who paid all those hundreds of pounds for your sanatorium?”

He sat down on the table and covered his ears. Then he slumped and stared straight ahead, exhausted. He murmured, “I’ve had enough of this inanity. The strongest man in the world couldn’t take it. If I stay here one more week I’ll be ready for the madhouse.”

She tenderly took his hand, maternally stroked the cheeks still red from her slaps, and said, “Tom, I asked you over and over to give up this kind of work. Your nerves can’t take it, and right after the sanatorium too.”

He pushed her away, with a dark expression on his face. “The hardest thing to take is you, with your affairs. But now you’ve been punished, and as for your last sweetheart, you’ve sure lost him.”

“Tom, stop being silly.”

His crazy expression scared her.

“Come on, Tom, we have to get out of here. They’ll arrest us. Come on.”

He turned his face toward the door. “They’re all sitting there. Waiting for us, for the result of your interrogation, Nebeltrine.”

“Enough, please, Tom.”

“Good Mr. Valley is sweating blood. I confessed everything to him yesterday. He almost cried. I told him we wanted to vanish from the scene.”

With a gloomy smile, Wiscott showed her his wallet. It was stuffed full of money.

“All from Valley.”

The company at the table in the next room would have gone on snoring and snoozing until morning if some of them hadn’t been overcome with fear after such a long silence in the side room. The spirits, deceitful as they so often were, must have broken their pact and had taken justice into their own hands on the spot; it was all over, this was the terrible end of an encounter between this side and the beyond that had begun so splendidly.

They couldn’t stop themselves. They stood up and anxiously approached the closed door. The detective was more afraid than anyone—he could see his hopes going up in smoke.

When they stood at the door and heard nothing stirring within, they looked at one another, then someone gave a tug and opened the door.

The first in fell back with a scream.

The room was . . . empty.

No sign of Nebeltrine, nor of the brewer spirit, Schnurzel/Süffel, nor even of the medium. They had even kidnapped the medium, probably to use him in their future agitations against this side.

Everyone was so shaken and horrified that they did not even dare to sit in the chairs that the abducted might have touched. They found no blood in the room. Only the glimmer of a cigarette on the floor.

It was midnight. When they sounded the alarm, the landlord appeared, who incidentally seemed to want to lock up. They explained the situation.

Most of the people present were staring stupidly into space and had not yet freed themselves from the influence of certain spheres of the beyond. They growled in a high degree of spiritualization, bleated and cackled, some managed to croak and look shamefacedly around now and then, presumably for spirits.

This behavior made no impression whatsoever on the landlord. He was used to dealing with occulto-spiritualists.

He jovially explained to the gentlemen who had summoned him that they needn’t worry about the vanished parties. At least when it came to Wiscott and the floozy, he had seen them both in the lounge an hour before. No spirits were present. He would swear to that. The pair had been sitting as close together as can be and had downed several rounds of mulled wine and cognac. Finally, they had ordered a taxi and merrily made off. Valley asked if Mr. Wiscott had paid. The landlord grinned. “No, same as usual. He said it was on the society’s tab.”

When the landlord left, the president, who looked calm and fresh again despite the late hour, remarked, “Naturally, what this man said is all nonsense. We have no idea who sat there carousing in the restaurant as the medium and Nebeltrine.”

Weisskäse, the second-in-command, said, “It must be the same ones as in the cemetery.”

Valley: “They can take on different shapes, to fool people.”

The detective (a beginner in occult matters) was stunned. “Still, I sat the young lady down on that chair.”

Valley shrugged. “Well, you can be sure of one thing: She’s not there anymore. The medium has

disappeared too."

The detective, a beginner in spirito-occultism, as mentioned, stammered, "But they were drinking mulled wine and cognac downstairs."

Valley, perfectly politely: "But to whom are you referring, my friend? To whom?"

The policeman could no longer make heads or tails of anything. He asked no more questions. He merely jingled the handcuffs uncertainly (as though trying to lure the criminal back, but she did not appear). Then he shook his head—if only to convince himself that it was still sitting on his shoulders, because it was spinning. He knew only that, this time too, his prospects of a permanent position would come to nothing.

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The public took a lively interest in the case.

The co-mediums, who had not been translated and kidnapped, were found the next morning, when people wanted to question them, in a strange state. They were not in full command of their senses and talked drivel, for instance that they had to follow the instructions of a certain senior-ranking member of the beyond. One of the women told crazy stories about a mother-in-law, Nebbich, from Damascus, who had had all sorts of problems with one Omai-Omi, starting a few centuries ago.

What were people supposed to make of that? Valley had no comment. Weisskäse the huckster, as Valley's spokesman, told the reporters streaming into the building, "The case is not as simple for us spiritualists as it is for advocates of so-called healthy common sense. Much of what this healthy common sense says seems doubtful and suspicious to us."

"And vice versa," murmured the reporters, scribbling in their notebooks.

Weisskäse: "The pair's disappearance and the murder are indeed closely linked, in fact even more closely than the layman's eye can see. Think of the mysterious side of the case, which hasn't changed: the incident in the cemetery, the retrieval of the missing pajamas, etc. For us paranormal researchers the case stands as follows: The astral world played a role in this murder, in a way never before seen and not yet explained."

"So that is your explanation of the murder and the disappearance?" the reporters asked, entirely straight-faced. They had been photographing Weisskäse in various poses during the interview. Other society members, insofar as they had returned to their senses that morning, added that these sessions were the first successful attempt at collaboration between this side and the beyond. They had learned vitally important things about the nature and way of life of astral beings. The problem on the other side was a lack of things to do. No one could stand it. The spirits had no diversions, because they had no bodies, and so they were forced to be lazy, indeed grow lazier and lazier. The devil finds work for idle hands. They grow capricious and deceitful there. Thus we mustn't have any illusions about establishing a truly punctual and reliable system of transportation between here and the beyond.

The papers put out the news that same evening, under the headlines "Spiritualists Tricked" and "See You in the Beyond, Or in Jail."

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The vanished duo—the elegant gambler and the soubrette, Dutort—were traced to London two months later, when she brought him into a police station there, asking to be set free of him.

She told the following story:

He was her husband. They had been married for five years. He had many talents, but never put them to real use. He did all sorts of stupid things. He gambled, bet, and had let her support him for the past two years. And she had always been glad to do it.

But he was terribly jealous. Her career as a soubrette brought her into contact with all sorts of people, including gentlemen of course. He took it badly. As he did the occasional gifts she sometimes received, which she couldn't refuse because he lost so much money gambling.

She had invited the deceased van Steen to have a glass of wine in her room one time—he had lived upstairs in the hotel, in the same wing as her.

She cried for several minutes when she came to this point in her very plausible-sounding report (at a police station in West London—Wiscott, meanwhile, sat silently in the corner as though the whole thing had nothing to do with him).

Then, she went on, her husband had surprised her with van Steen. At first, invited in by van Steen, he had drunk along with them, and they talked about this and that. He didn't show any signs of anger, and she was glad he was behaving so well. Then—

“He has been sick since a car accident. All of a sudden it comes over him. What? He is not really there. He looks perfectly reasonable, it’s just that his gaze becomes strangely rigid and he purses his mouth over and over, which otherwise he never does. Then he talks crazy. That’s why I sent him to the sanatorium. Anyway, he started dancing with van Steen too, who thought it was fun, but I could see what was happening to Tom, and of course I also knew how jealous he could get. Right away I was so scared. But he danced with van Steen and talked all kinds of crazy nonsense and van Steen couldn’t stop laughing. Tom didn’t bat an eye. I just wanted us to leave. But van Steen was having so much fun, he thought Tom was simply drunk. And so they had to dance some more, and I had to join in, even though I didn’t like what Tom was doing, and then he gave me and van Steen such a swing and was so strong that I knocked over the table with the glasses and van Steen was flung against the stove.”

Again she stopped. She sobbed. Wiscott looked over at her, with furrowed brow; he was listening, but it was impossible to tell how much he understood.

She: “I don’t know what happened next. Van Steen was lying there. I was dazed myself. I thought, I have to get out of here as fast as I can, or something will happen. I ran to my room. Tom came after a while and sat with me a while. He came back to his senses too. Then he left.”

“And everything around the body?” the commissioner asked.

“But Tom didn’t know he was dead! He just told me, ‘He’s lying on the carpet. We’ll leave him there.’”

“So later, when he left your room, he went to van Steen’s mansion and broke in. And what about the broken window and torn curtains in the hotel?”

Wiscott, looking pale and incoherent, spoke up: “The spirits did that. He was lying there bleeding and still moving. Then they broke the window and took him.”

The careworn soubrette continued her statement: Wiscott was a ventriloquist and magician by profession. She could not accept any jobs herself, because she had to keep an eye on him. He has a screw loose, a spiritualist screw. He has conversations in the dark with a certain Depp, from Upper Egypt (“Does he know anyone named Depp?” the commissioner wanted to know. She: “God no! It’s all his imagination”), and with someone he calls the “senior dope from the upper ranks.” It frightened her.

They sent him to an asylum.

There he recovered from his spiritualist fits rather quickly. He took up his profession again under another name, despite having fallen victim to it himself, and referred everything that had taken place during his participation in the spiritualist sessions in E. to the realm of fiction, namely a tale produced by him. It had all been invented and arranged by him, he said. It had been very *contre coeur* for him to get involved in the van Steen affair, he said, and Eveline, his wife, had even warned him and tried to dissuade him. But when he saw how scared she was—about her reputation, her job—he decided to teach her a lesson. He wanted to make her squirm—naturally, he wanted to compromise her, punish her, and have his revenge. But now everything was fine between them. (“At least as far as I know,” he added with a smile and a shrug.)

His statements concerning the séances in E. sharply contradicted what the other participants had to say, of course. Mr. Valley, for instance, who incidentally had retreated back into simple postal deliveries limited entirely to this side, said that it was well known that mediums lie. On the other hand, it was also well known that mediums do not understand their own activities. In a waking state, they have a completely laymanlike idea of their talents. They see their accomplishments through a rational lens, no different from the man on the street. Many mediums, when outside the trance state, consider themselves frauds.

“Which they probably often are,” the reporters said.

“Of course, just like everyone else. And the money that can be made with this gift corrupts many of them. But what does that prove about the genuine and convincing phenomena?”

And, let’s be honest: Wiscott’s explanations also contradict what we think ourselves.

For if we took those explanations seriously, all of our insights into the other side that we have only just gained would again be thrown into doubt: the incredible idleness and boredom that reigns there, the chronic atrophy the astral beings suffer from, their loss of memory and intelligence, resulting in great wisdom and refinement, which marks the character of the whole realm of the beyond and gives it its marvelous structure: the all-powerful blockheads at the very top, who no longer even know who they are (loss of individual personality), then the ranks of Depps, with Nulpe and the other dopes, and, in the lower depths, still close to our earth, the many bright figures unstoppably drawing away, such as Mrs. Nebbich, Omai-Omi the donkey driver’s mother-in-law, who still, after all these centuries, has to stick her nose into everything.

MATERIALISM, A FABLE

FOR A LONG time, everything went beautifully. No one had any complaints about the present state—we are speaking here of the state of the world, of Nature—and why would they? Nature, before it achieved consciousness of its tragic condition, about which more below, carried on in peace and deep contentment; it could have kept on doing so without end, as far as it was concerned. And wherever poets and philosophers stood up and plucked their lutes or opened their big mouths, they did nothing more passionately or with more conviction than praise the beauty and (despite everything they could see and feel in their own lives) harmony of the world.

And Nature herself knew how things were, namely good. Eternal wisdom had laid the measures of the earth, sunk its foundations, laid its cornerstone. Ancient wisdom made the turtles bury their eggs in the hot sand where the sun would incubate them. Truth, precise knowledge, and primordial power taught the mountain goats when they should go breed on the cliffs and when the hinds were with child.

Among human beings, we mustn't neglect to mention, there were some dissenting voices. For example, in ancient Greece, during the time of Socrates (another real dissenter), there lived a certain Democritus, a prosperous man, a clever and idle mind, and incidentally a bon vivant as well. One day, when he didn't know what he should do to pass the time, he counted up his money and said to himself, "Let's take a trip. What do you think of Egypt, Democritus my old friend?"

This speech was irresistible and he set off on a tour, spending seven long years in Egypt. No one knows what exactly he did there, or what sorts of people the carefree fellow consorted with. The only certainty is that he returned with empty pockets and a theory. We must be allowed to reserve judgment about whether said theory was the only thing he had spent all his money on. Democritus's contemporaries were certainly skeptical on this point, in any case, and didn't want to hear a thing about his theory, only about the other things he had done in Egypt, and he told them about those things too, and it must have been a bright and pleasing tale he told, and afterward he lived on in Greece until his death at a great old age, in his ninetieth year, it was said, an exemplary figure in the opinion of his friends. However, we do not want to conceal from our readers what his theory looked like—a theory that perhaps contributed to the extension of his happy life.

There is actually nothing much to say about the world, the grinning wise man proclaimed—at least not much worth telling or knowing if we have our own interests at heart. The most important things in the world are the atoms. That's right, atoms. They are the most important and, when you come right down to it, the only things. They exist in monstrously large number and fill infinite space. Their unimaginably massive quantity fills space to such an extent that there is no room left for emptiness. (Or for other things, as we will soon hear.) Who and what these "atoms" are can be stated in an instant: They are the smallest structures, indivisible particles, entirely alike, without the particular qualities we ascribe to natural things—heat, cold, color, etc. There is nothing hot and nothing cold, nothing bitter and nothing sweet, and iron and water are one and the same. It's true, iron and water are one and the same for enlightened beings, because the same atoms are behind them both. What makes atoms different, or rather seem different, has to do with the speed with which they fall through space. Because in so doing, in their plummeting through enormous space, the atoms coalesce, form eddies and currents. Rotations arise. The theory recalls the Kant-Laplace theory of the origin of the world.

And so it leads to this visible, audible, tangible world of ours, with all its astonishing colorful variety. There are no miracles, only mechanics, strict regularity, calculability.

So much for Democritus, who some say came from Miletus, others say came from Abdera—the latter a city on the coast of Thrace, long since reduced to rubble, whose air, proverbially, caused stupidity.

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The revelations of Democritus passed over the surface of the world without leaving a trace. Nature, in its innocence, continued to enjoy carrying on in the same cheerful childlike way as before. The plants, unconcerned with atoms—these dark fiends in their bellies—continued to burrow the fibers of their roots into the earth and happily draw up from it what tasted good to and agreed with them; they grew narrow and then ever broader leaves, took in one mixture of gases and breathed out another, without paying even the slightest attention to the highly complex chemical reactions taking place and, in point of fact, constituting it. They sluggishly let the sun shine on them and drank in the warm light as a child does

sweet milk at its mother's breast.

Later they even unfolded flowers and scattered seeds, and these were the only tasks the plants performed, with all of their passion, and could have performed for another hundred thousand years, and each generation passed on its blessing to the next. And when the grass fulfilled its biblical fate and withered, it had no objections, since it had done what it needed to do. The straw, the wheat, the rye and barley and oats let the human beings sow them year in and year out, and meekly let themselves be reaped. Mighty oaks, beech, and firs endured without complaint the appearance of woodcutters, cutting them down with their hatchets and turning the wood they had brought forth for entirely different purposes into planks and beams, so that the strong trees, after their death, underwent a metamorphosis into huts, and boats, into cabinets, doors, tables, chairs, and stairs, or reappeared as walking sticks, but without pain, without resistance or complaint.

And no different, no less happy, ever satisfied and steadfast, was the behavior of the animals of land, sea, and air. They too, trusting in the mysterious wisdom and power behind them, lived their lives brightly, cheerfully, and, if you will, unthinkingly—come what may. For the animals, including beetles, ants, and bees, did not lag behind the plants in their celebrations of life, and with dreamlike extravagance they cast child after child into the world regardless of whether or not there was any room for them.

Everything occurred in this way: Happy in its own skin, content, and securely protected.

—But lying in wait in the background was Democritus, the sinister man from Miletus, or Abdera.

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And as time went on and people poked their noses into more and more of the world and grew cleverer and cleverer, they also realized that they had been sleeping until then, and they saw for the first time what life really was. Electrons, waves, vibrations in the ether: These formed the world. These were the true reality. These were real. We scatter feelings, thoughts, and ideas over these facts. We even imagine we act.

This great, stunning truth appeared among human beings and spread among them like wildfire.

And when, unavoidably, it spread to Nature too, to the plants and animals and elements, a great sadness commenced among them. They were shocked and shattered, overcome with fear, dread, horror.

Anyone who wonders how this happened—how the news reached Nature, and how it could have such an effect—should keep in mind that humanity enjoys great respect in Nature and, one might say, is considered its head. Various acts of carelessness had occurred. Professors had discussed the new theory at home, in the presence of their dogs; other dogs had escaped the labs where they had been subjected to various painful experiments in connection with the teachings; guinea pigs, vaccinated and unvaccinated, got away and told their speciesmates—and anyone else who was interested—what they had experienced. Among the white mice and the flies used for genetic experiments, the new teachings were soon on everyone's lips.

From the dogs the information reached the cats, in the course of their usual quarrels, and from the cats, during various hunts for birds they wanted to stun, to the birds. (The news turned out to be excellent bait from the cats' point of view: quite a number of birds were immediately paralyzed with amazement upon hearing it, so that their heads could be bitten off without any trouble.) The birds, born reporters, then carried the news far and wide, into the surrounding area and foreign lands.

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What did they hear, what terrible news was conveyed to them then, vouched for by the authority of humankind? That they had not lived. They had only imagined it. Now it was known who actually lived. The mice and dogs could show the wounds from which the new teachings had been drawn on their own bodies, but as for who actually lived, the dogs and white mice and guinea pigs couldn't say—the names were frightfully difficult, enigmatic, even most humans couldn't pronounce them. The professors who had discovered the doctrines often stood up in front of a black board with a piece of chalk and wrote lots of numbers on it with letters in between and the whole thing was the name of the creature that actually lives. Basically there was nothing to say. It all happened between these numbers and letters. It was proven in test tubes and on blackboards. If you picked up a stone and asked it "What will you do when I let go of you?," it can't, if it's honest, answer anything but "Fall, according to the equation $d = 1/2\ gt2$." Is that living? Is that a life? You have to admit, it was an unacceptable situation.

It was no different among the plants. Things here were more complicated, and that was an excuse to some extent. But they too realized: It was all a scam, false pretenses so that you would play along and

stick it out, or actually who knows why. When carbon dioxide says A, chlorophyll says B. A dog wouldn't want to live like that.

The venerable cow in her stall, nourisher of us all, the matron, what about her? She chewed her hay and let herself be milked. What was that if you called it by its real names? Manufacture, continuous production, fueling, carburetion, combustion, conversion, synthesis, dross, expulsion of dross, product. And this monotonous stupor was what we had thought was existence, life. This was what we identified ourselves with. Moreover, though it's horrible to think about: We had actually thought it was fun. What a scam.

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Depression and disappointment are expressed differently in Nature than among humankind, who always have crying, sobbing, and shrieking at their disposal. Nature, with few exceptions, was fundamentally set up for happiness. Now there was a great lamentation. I admit it: When I see how a materialist looks, I'm glad I'm not stuck in his skin.

On a country road leading to Maastricht, Holland, I once saw a strange motion on the ground: several stones, pebbles really, revolving around each other in perplexity, with the help of a surface wind they had entrusted themselves to. They were in complete despair. The surface wind stuck with them and helped them turn so that they could give suitable expression to their condition. It did not believe the story they were telling, it did not even understand it, because it, the wind, naturally felt free and untethered. The new revelation did not concern it, it thought, because it knew nothing of the necessary and sufficient conditions of its existence—warmth, cold, and their effects on air currents. It would be stripped of its criminal indifference soon enough.

Not far away, in a fallow field behind a windmill, a head-size stone with sharp edges had to be held in place by several of its friends, bricks and pebbles. It wanted to do something (no one knew what). It cried out in despair, it couldn't stand it anymore. To spend its whole life like that: heavy, heavy, nothing but heavy, and unable to do what it wanted. Yes, well, what did it want to do? its friendly neighbor stones asked. It didn't even know that, it admitted, and its ravings grew even worse. It was unbearable, it said, it had to put an end to it.

A boulder on the Finsteraarhorn in the Swiss Alps sat mightily enthroned above a mountainside. It had peered out so majestically into the distance that an observation tower had been built on it. It plummeted into the depths and shattered. When others told it that it wouldn't escape its afflictions that way, the unhappy creature said that this was enough. There was more to come.

I traveled to an Indian jungle and witnessed the following event: A hyena was creeping along, looking for an audience. She ran into a tiger and communicated the situation to him. He held his nose, thinking this was one of the foul-smelling offerings that the lady usually aired. Then he started to pay attention, and had her stand downwind and repeat what she had to say. He scratched the back of his neck with his right back paw, stood thoughtfully with head lowered, yawned, and sauntered off.

He trotted into his den. His wife (he had a wife and seven cubs) was amazed to see him home so early (it was seven thirty in the morning, she had woken him up at six), and empty-handed too. Maybe he wasn't feeling well, or maybe the vulture had crossed his path from right to left—the tiger was superstitious.

But he just growled angrily and retreated to his corner. Something must have happened to him, but what? And what was that suspicious smell on him? Hyena. That old gossipmonger. She'd give her a piece of her mind. What had that poisonous tattletale been telling him now, and was it about her? She needed to teach her a lesson. Mrs. Tiger picked up her shawl and set off at once.

Meanwhile he lay in his nook and listened gloomily to the squeaking of his seven hungry brats.

"The lot of them," he thought. "Born dumb and stay dumb their whole life. Why are they mewling? What's the point of getting worked up? They're hungry. Well, they only think they're hungry. It's not about them at all. It's a feeling, a sensation, all superstructure. If I brought them some meat they'd think they were full. It's just hydrochloric acid reacting in their stomachs. What does hydrochloric acid have to do with them? Are we put on earth to do our hydrochloric acid's bidding? Let it take care of its own reactions."

The hyena had told him about hydrochloric acid too, and about hydrogen, but he hadn't understood that part.

"Hydro-this, hydro-that," he lamented, "it's a hydra. Now acid, yes, it's all acid. Leaves a sour taste in your mouth, life does."

His wife came back, smelling of hyena, and started scolding before she was through the door. "What are you doing talking to that old pig? The nonsense she picks up. You should get us some food."

Then the tiger stood up, conscious of his familial dignity, and slapped her open snout with the back of his right front paw. He spanked the seven squealing pests with his left paw and tail and crept out. They thought he was just being friendly and that he'd be back soon.

He growled. "It's all superstructure in this house." They didn't understand him.

As soon as he was out of sight and smell, he sat down by a tree and meditated.

"It is sobering," the tiger said to himself, "what the hyena told me. Very sobering. That hyena is getting worse and worse. Now it's not enough for her to stink on her own, she has to spread bad news from elsewhere too. But she's right. Everything we do is meaningless. How could I have been so blind. It's chemical reactions and reflexes wherever you look. Ideas, thoughts, dreams, wishes—all superstructure. As soon as I see an antelope I jump after it: a simple mechanical reflex, just arbitrary, and so fast I don't even have time to think about it. That's how I'm built. What a world. I started a family and brought seven rascals into the world for this. It's sobering all right. What a waste of time."

He had a stretch, gloomily. An antelope bounding by heard him declaim, "Treachery, thy name is Nature."

When he caught sight of the antelope, he felt a movement inside himself, the tensing of muscles to spring, and said, "Aha, there you have it. The test case. Reflexes, nothing but reflexes. I can see through that trick, my friend."

And he swore: "No more meat. Never again. Not even antelope."

And he crept off into the bushes and ate some roots. He turned vegetarian. Then, because he didn't know how to nibble roots and got a mouth full of sand, he drank something and sat down in a cornfield. The antelopes ran away and watched him from afar, in disbelief. The bloodthirsty tiger was gnawing corncobs. They were amazed. They thought it must be a trap. They still didn't know.

Then some of the nimblest antelopes screwed up their courage and dared to approach him. They prowled around him. And when he didn't do anything, they gave him a good, ripe corncob, since he was so bad at choosing them for himself. He thanked them gloomily and ate. They couldn't believe their eyes. He touched their tender feelings. They could also see, after a few days, that his fur was unkempt, he was emaciated, his gaze was dull. Stomach trouble? Diet? Domestic discord?

Then he spoke to them: "Everything is reflexes. It's not worth it. We've been lied to. We are not what we seem. No one is who he thinks he is. Water isn't the substance it takes itself to be, it's just a mix of various elements in a ratio of four to one."

He hung his head. The antelopes were speechless with shock. They had just drunk some water and not noticed anything special about it.

The tiger: "Wherever you look: empirical facts. No trace of will. The name is everything, feelings are just smoke and mirrors."

This is how the antelopes heard the news. To them it put its best face forward—the tiger was leaving them alone. Repeated conversations with him, in which he behaved like a penitent, a sad sage, eventually made them realize that they too were affected. Again and again the tiger murmured over and over, "It's sobering. It's very sobering." And since the antelopes' strong suit was more their legs than their brains, his melancholy depressed them too, so they took to their heels and brought what the tiger had said about water to the spring. They made no headway. The spring burbled and burbled—no one could understand what it said, but it was, as always, nice to hear— and it tasted the same as always, the news didn't cloud or spoil it.

The antelopes, born letter-carriers, circulated the tiger's maxims farther and met the rhinoceros and the crocodile by the river. Both were deeply interested in the news, especially since it came from the tiger. But they were slow to understand it, thanking the antelopes with a grunt. They were also, clearly, much too busy with their own affairs—the rhinoceros with producing children, the crocodile with sleeping.

Not so the elephant. He had them repeat a hundred times how it stood: about atoms, and reflexes, and that everything else was just superstructure. The antelopes, since they couldn't keep straight what the tiger in his profundity had proclaimed, brought a few older parrots along to their conversations with the tiger, as stenographers you might say. They repeated to the elephant word for word what they heard: about causality (the elephant thought this had to do with a raven's caws), about waves and vibrations (the parrot said "libations"). Finally the elephant seemed to understand. It gave a deep sigh, of a kind that had never passed through its trunk before, and then demanded proof. The antelopes were not prepared for that.

With their secretaries, they raced back to the tiger, who had taken a job with a farmer as an assistant gardener. He was just then watering the flowers. They asked him for proof. Evidence mattered to the elephant.

The tiger, setting aside his watering can and stroking his whiskers—it was his first cheerful moment in weeks—sympathetically answered, “If he still needs proof, then the gentleman cannot be helped. Does Mr. Elephant really want to end up in a lab himself?”

The antelopes: From whom did the esteemed Mr. Tiger learn all of this, about the atoms and the superstructure? Who might condescend to explain it to them as well?

The tiger, who had returned to his work, scornfully shook his head and tossed out: “Try the hyena.”

So the antelopes and their staff were off to the hyena, and thence to certain migrating birds who had recently arrived, and then it came out: The source was people. The cranes named as key witnesses several dogs and a group of guinea pigs, all of whom had spent years working in a laboratory. Their reports were entirely consistent. That was enough to satisfy even the elephant. It trumpeted in shock for an entire morning. It wandered aimlessly back and forth through the jungle. But it didn’t fall apart. It had too thick a skin for that.

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The fresh young grass on the plains, though, couldn’t bear up under the great news it heard from all the animals walking on it.

Every day the grass sprouted anew. It was young and delicate. The tidings—“Everything is matter; thoughts and feelings are just window dressing, just imagination”—had a devastating effect on their tender feelings, since after all the grasses poured forth their whole life in the few weeks between dissemination, germination, and withering away, and enthusiastically sacrificed themselves for all who needed them, from the worms to the ponderous grazing cattle. We would never have thought that the grass, this ordinary meadow grass and plains grass wildly growing and perishing in millions of copies, would pine and grieve so over the loss of its individual personality, since obviously, as we all know, it doesn’t have any. But look, it does (or at least—let’s not meddle—it thinks it does). Or no, why overlook it and deny it? Every single straight green despised blade of grass in its simple workday clothing was a little individual, a being of its own, daily growing with the dew and the sun, loving and marveling at the moon and the starry sky.

Now, as the animals discussed the news, how could the grass cover its ears? At first the grasses defended themselves, saying it’s not true, it’s just rumors, it can’t be true. Then the mass of yea-sayers overcame their resistance and they began to cry and lament. Now they were supposed to not love the glittering dew anymore, the fresh morning, the little beetles crawling on them? It was all dumb, retarded, and ridiculous, all worthless? They were no longer supposed to hold their delicate little flowers up to the sun and entrust to it what they had brought forth?

They sobbed day and night. It had all been so sweet, before—not to mention the calm and the certainty. Now: it was illusion, all illusion, imagination, self-deception.

And it had to be true. The lapwings said so, the parrots agreed, the pelicans opened their beaks wide with amazement and didn’t even swallow the flies that flew in. The migrating storks stood in studious groups, their long red beaks on their breasts, one leg tucked up, debating back and forth for hours. Crowds of frogs leapt around their feet and listened, like students to their professors. And no one knew what they should do.

The animals had time, those big slow creatures. Not the blades of grass. They withered too quickly; they were staring death in the face.

They steeled themselves. They did not say, like the tiger, “It’s sobering, it’s very sobering” and then go help a farmer. They withdrew into themselves, no longer interested in sun or cow or butterfly. Like monks, they cloistered themselves. They covered themselves with a callus, which they then turned into a little bamboo stalk. They turned sharper than reeds. Silent and sealed up like a band of warriors, a forest of spears, they stood together.

Now as the cool night drew to a close in Rajasthan, India, and a fakir had finished his morning devotions at home—lying for two hours on a bed of sharp nails—he left the house and, to relax and enjoy the fresh dewy morning, threw himself onto the rolling meadow outside. At once he let out a shriek of bloody murder. People poured out of his and the neighboring houses and helped the holy man stand up. He could barely move. His skin was bleeding on his back and arms and he was covered all over with tiny needles: blades of grass that had to be pulled out one by one. It took hours. They didn’t think it was possible, but they could see it with their own eyes: The harmless grass had turned dangerous overnight. The fakir sat on his veranda in shock. What had driven the lovely grass out of its mind? Why would it assault a holy man?

Already children from the neighborhood were coming running with their goats and sheep. They begged the holy man to help them: The animals had mouths pricked all over and bloody tongues, they

were bleating and baaing miserably, they were hungry but didn't dare go out into the grass. The children themselves were bleeding from their hands and naked feet. A great cry of woe went up from both animals and humans. The fakir had to do something. He showed them his back. The goats bleated questioningly and there was nothing he could say. To recover, he lay back down on his bed of nails.

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Far away, in Abyssinia, the Blue Nile flowed, and there were waterfalls.

How magnificent the spray as the water thunderingly rolled over the cliffs in white whirls, plunged into the maw of rock, and dashed itself to pieces—how blissfully the masses of foam, the millions of droplets, hurled themselves toward the sun, arcing a wide rainbow over the falls. This had happened since time immemorial, the animals knew it and partook of it, and the water never tired of bringing its inundations to the cliffs, venturing one exultant plunge after another, hurtling in and passing away, surging down in a haze, day and night.

Who brought the terrible news to the happy waterfalls? Migrating birds. By midsummer they had already left Europe, and their early arrival attracted attention. They had rushed south, bathed in sweat as it were, with their terrible tidings. From the pheasants, pelicans, and bitterns they met with total skepticism. These birds thought they were crazy. The messengers were acting like it was the end of the world. The fishes and swamp animals noticed their agitated twittering, shrieking, and cawing, and so the news reached the water.

Having seen how the grass reacted to the news, it will come as no surprise that the water—utterly soft, delicate, without any protective skin—took the news to heart, dissolving in tears. It was most wretchedly stung to the quick. To be debunked just like that, with a single, tiny formula, H_2O? What was once a thousand shape-shifting beauties, a thousand miracles—icebergs, hail, rain, snowflakes, mountain springs, rivers, oceans, present in everything alive, practically all-powerful—was now just H_2O. It was enough to crush even a stronger spirit. The water could only grieve. There was now only one thing it wanted to do: grieve. No question of creating another rainbow. No sign of joy, no many-colored variety, no adding to false appearances. There were enough lies already.

The water lost its high-spirited merriment. It flowed sluggishly, slow and stagnant. It would get where it was going soon enough. No need to push. The water above the falls spread out flat and seemed to want to seep away into the ground. It avoided forming eddies where they weren't absolutely necessary and muffled any sound of splashing. Then, once it reached the edge of the cliff, it crawled—to the amazement of the birds and plants that did not see through the water's behavior—it crept cautiously down like an old man, throwing off no superfluous drops to either side. Like a miser, the water, which was once so rich and spendthrift, clung tightly to its possessions. When at last it finally plopped to the bottom, it again spread out smooth and kept a straight face. It didn't flash when the sun shone down, and it rippled when the moon came to look at itself in the mirror of the water and coif itself for the night. It's easy to understand how annoyed the moon must have been. Because the moon, shining its light on so many gallant adventures, naturally wants to look presentable itself in such circumstances.

In vain did the birds wait for their misty bath, in vain and appalled did the bushes and trees up above and to either side await the gush they expected to drink. The water kept to itself. It was like a worried old woman, a widow, with dry eyes, going to market. She clutches her purse in her hand and pays no attention to the beggars abjectly coming up to her. She bites her lips and stares severely straight ahead.

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This was the period of depression. It didn't stop there.

One fine day, a white-bearded chimpanzee showed up to visit the tiger who had sunk so low as to be an assistant gardener. He had a big book in his hand, which a jungle expedition had lost, and during lunch break he read at length from it to the tiger. It was as clear as day from the book that the world did not in fact deserve the boundless trust it had once been given. It was entirely meaningless, pointless, and irrational, although it could be described mathematically. Precisely the fact that it could be described mathematically (the erudite chimpanzee explained) obscured—or tried to obscure—the irrationality hidden behind it, the utter nothingness. He said it was like the brilliant rainbow show that the H_2O used to put on, back when it was still called "the water," "His Honor the Water." Once you fundamentally realize the meaninglessness and complete emptiness and charlatanry of the world, you invent something so as not to seem like a fool to yourself and others. You grasp at images and symbols, which look like something, because you're ashamed to live in a world as blockheaded as this one, set in motion by nothing but these idiotic things like atoms and electrons. Still, it's all totally superfluous. Everything

would take its course even without these images and symbols, and maybe better.

At this the tiger, truly starving by now, put aside his spoon (his master the gardener had taught him table manners) with which he was eating the gruel they had prescribed for him because of his endless stomach pains, and pricked up his ears.

"The chaos in the world," the bleak old ape went on, "is obvious. Something goes wrong now here, now there. Now it rains too much, now too little. Now the trees are covered with fruit, now we look and look and the caterpillars have destroyed everything. People have seen that for a long time, and complained about it, but no one has ever thought seriously about it and drawn the proper conclusions. Now at least we know why."

"So why?" the tiger asked in a melancholy voice. He wanted to blame this cause for his stomach troubles. "What's the cause?" He was full of resentment. An assistant gardener does not have it easy. He wanted to know what was behind his problems and then, when he knew it, try to tackle it.

The chimp: "There is no place in the world for reason."

"What?" the tiger asked, amazed. "You're joking." He pointed to the wide plains outspread before them. "There's plenty of room there."

The ape laughed a supercilious laugh. "It only looks that way. Actually it's all full. There is no place free."

The tiger screamed in rage, "There's no one there! Open your eyes."

"All full," the ape repeated patiently, refusing to be intimidated since he knew he was right. "There's the earth on the bottom, above it the grass, then the air and the light, and on top the sky and the sun. I don't see any gaps."

"And not even an inch of space," the tiger lamented, "for reason?"

The chimpanzee stayed firm: "All occupied already. Atoms and electrons everywhere."

"Those bastards," the tiger cursed. "If I could get my hands on just one of them. But why? Did reason get here too late? Or did it let the atoms go first?"

"Who knows? Maybe it was force. Force always outweighs justice. The one with the sharpest elbows gets through."

A long pause. The dignified white-beard slapped his belly and pushed his reading glasses up onto his forehead. "And because that's how it is, because reason, back when the world was being set up, got the short end of the stick, we have to take care of it ourselves. Now we have to look after our own interests."

That cleared things up for the tiger. He liked that. It made him light at heart.

He stood up at once on his four long shaggy legs and shook out his scrawny body, all covered with burrs. He let out a growl that made the old chimpanzee drop his valuable book in the bowl of gruel. But suddenly the tiger seemed no longer interested in gruel. He stepped into the bowl with his left paw. The ape ran away and clambered up the nearest tree. He cried for help to the gardener. Something seemed wrong with the tiger. But the tiger jeered up at him: "You hit the nail on the head there, chimp. We have to look after our own interests. And we will."

And he leapt at his master, the gardener, who had come running to see why the ape was screaming and shouting—knocked him down and bit him in the throat. He raced off in leaps and bounds to the cornfield where the antelopes were playing. They thought he must be rushing up to share some interesting news from the wider world. Indeed he did. He leapt at an antelope, brought it down, tore it to pieces, and drank blood once again, hot blood after several long months. It tasted so good and made his stomach pains go away so completely that he immediately turned the page and went after the next one and brought that one down too and let out his terrible roar, which told the animals: The tiger is back.

"We have to look after our own interests," he panted, eyes twinkling. "We have to bring reason into the world. I'll do my part."

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That was the turning point. Nature came to understand, in its way, what the natural scientists and philosophers and enlightenment thinkers had reported.

Nature broke through to itself. It took the situation into its own hands. It let fly the flag of liberating materialism: a grass-green ox eating grass on a grass-green background. You are what you are. Let no creature, in its freedom, in its scientifically proven and mathematically certain meaninglessness, be constrained.

After the tiger, feeling the new age in the air, gave the sign, the uprising of Nature—the resistance—spread everywhere.

The frogs trumpeted: "To each his own world."

The saying went around: "Start with nothing, end with nothing, that's the best way to live."

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The first acts of a world set free by materialism and left to its own devices were soon plain to see. As the theory itself would suggest, everything proceeded without any sort of plan, but no one could deny that what happened bore all the signs of genuine meaninglessness.

A driver in the entirely neutral city of Bern filled up his tank with gas: good, distilled, high-octane, and fully, as the Americans say, *up-to-date*. As soon as it found itself in the tank, the gas shared its view of the world with the various engine parts. Soon afterward, the driver appeared (it was a large fashion studio's car) and drove off. Suddenly it seemed he was having engine trouble, but he could feel that it was trouble of a very unusual kind. He shifted into this gear, pulled that lever, pulled the other lever, lurched here, lurched there, it didn't matter. What wasn't responding was the car. You couldn't say that it wasn't going, but it wasn't going the way the driver wanted it to go. It was driving capriciously, temperamentally, surprisingly— wittily, you might say. It suddenly stopped—contemplatively, as though wanting to admire the view—at one of the lovely lookout points with which the city of Bern (bad luck for the driver) is so lavishly furnished.

Then it raced off like wild after a mutt, only to stop as soon as it caught up to it, as if it were grinning. Then it decided to drive backward—luckily they were in a sparsely populated suburb at that point.

We know what was happening: It was a game, a good-natured and mischievous obeisance on the car's part paid to its aged driver— a tribute, well-meaning if clumsy, like the one a young puppy offers when its master lets it loose outside.

The master, though, the driver, who had spring suits to deliver, did not understand any of it. He was thinking only about business. The spring, all around him, did not interest him either.

To bring him pleasure and make him think other thoughts, the car drove up a hill, took a little hop, and lay down gracefully on its side. The man jumped out. The car noticed and followed him. He fled, the faithful car right behind him. The man ran into a nearby pharmacy and slammed the door behind him. The car, surprised, stayed outside and purred.

Inside, the man called the police. As soon as the car heard the phone ringing, it smelled betrayal and ran off. They found it later five miles away, in a field, where it was apparently grazing. It put up no resistance to being caught and driven away. After a two-week observation period they had no idea what to do with it except slaughter it.

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The news flew to the chemical elements, which are among the most fusty and old-fashioned creatures in Nature. They have always done the same thing since forever and shown no sign of getting tired of it. Here we find the atoms. How, we wonder, bursting with curiosity, will they react? Mightn't they turn megalomaniacal when they learn the status to which they have been promoted—the first in creation, and moreover the actual foundations and creators of Nature, the true reality from which all objects (at bottom only apparent objects) draw their existence?

Here we have the hydrogen atom. It consists of a positive nucleus and an electron circling the nucleus along an elliptical path. We have here well-ordered, if also somewhat primitive, social relations. Still, within this modest framework, the atom does what it can. The electron takes its elliptical course with inimitable grace around its positive nucleus, which has watched it do so, arms folded, since the dawn of time. They share no intimate secrets (and perhaps that is precisely why the relationship is so stable). The electron draws not a millimeter closer to the nucleus it has been given. As soon as it seems to want to get closer, at certain points along the ellipse, a mere glance from the nucleus is enough to put it back in its place. Heaven only knows how they ended up in this singular relationship.

So now will the electron gain any insight into the outdated and compulsory aspects of its situation from this new announcement, and what conclusions will it draw—the electron, and perhaps the positive nucleus too, whose desire to leave its central position of rest is palpable? Nothing much happened. The relationship was too set in stone, neither side had enough initiative. Here and there an electron took it upon itself to change course and orbit in a circle around its sultan, the positive nucleus; elsewhere, an electron invited its former pasha to trade roles with it and take the elliptical trip itself. There was a little disorder and chaos, that's all—on the whole, they both just acted terribly flattered. The electron practically preened. Where was there any compulsion here, it asked. Everything's lovely here. It is magnificent, it has stood the test of time. And it blissfully, elegantly, made its way around the silent positive nucleus, which for its part stroked its mustache (so to speak) and for the first time nodded at it kindly.

One might have expected the lithium atom to behave a bit differently. For here there were a whole

bunch of electrons making extremely complicated orbits around their ancestral nucleus. Here, etiquette required that one electron always make an elongated ellipse and two electrons make smaller ellipses. (This supposedly had to do with important events in the early history of the Lithium people, honored in memory; the events have been forgotten, but the ellipses remain.) Couldn't the electrons now change their custom, or abolish it altogether? Wasn't the door wide open for them to do so, thanks to the new teachings? The result was nothing: here too, just haughty pride and maybe a little schadenfreude about the misfortune and uproar in the rest of the world, once so proud.

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In this wondrous time, it sometimes happened that certain rays of light arrived too late. Maybe you'd think this wouldn't matter—there are so many rays of light in the world. But listen and learn the wondrous ways in which this made itself felt after all. The rays of light the sun had been sending out for millennia rushed with monstrous speed through the ether. They marched at the insane rate of 186,000 miles per second, without stopping. They did so because the sun had sent them forth and because they followed the rules. The light thus arrived on earth and came into contact with plants, animals, etc. It heard the latest from all sides. The light, to tell the truth, had never cared much about news, it was always happy to arrive after its long trip and be there at last. But what was this they were whispering to it now? It was an interrogation, they were asking (rather maliciously) what it was up to, how it felt, how it was doing. The light didn't understand. For the questioners, the enlighteners, the ordinary roosters that the sunlight woke up on their perches every morning when they wanted to sleep later, it was a treat to see the light in the dark for once, at least about itself, and to teach it something.

Why, they crowed at the light (having considered the question the night before, in consultation with the owls, who felt bothered by the light for other reasons, shady characters as they were), why did the light arrive so early in the morning? What was the big hurry?

The light, breathless as always, stammered something about its duties, and how it couldn't slow down below 186,000 miles per second.

But why, what for, and what's the big rush, where's the fire? What difference did it actually make whether the light arrived at the prescribed time, other than satisfying its pride with an admittedly extraordinary athletic achievement—that by now, though, everyone knew more than enough about already. Less might, in this case too, be more. What did it accomplish? Nothing. It could be sure of that. It arrived right on schedule, made day, and went on its way at night, only to do the same thing again the next day, and why—when you looked at things in the proper light? To give us, the birds and the other animals, the opportunity to carry out our meaningless actions? And make it possible for human beings—who, by the way, think along exactly the same lines—to vent their moods on the other creatures?

"It is a crackbrained thing," crowed the roosters with feeling, "how the light does its job. It's day labor, there's nothing else like it under the sun. All to provide illumination for others, who take these colossal sprints for granted. As far as we're concerned, the light shouldn't bother. Thanks anyway. Let people plug in lamps when they need light."

At this, a number of rays of light approaching the earth slowed down above the stratosphere, shocked. The main body of them, who had not yet come into contact with the Nature down below, continued to arrive, but because they allowed themselves more and more time, the event still made itself felt. The enlightened rays were dawdling. Whether they were looking for company, a conversation, a diversion—who knows. In any case, many of them arrived among humankind in a strange condition, usually blue. Often a day late, too. They were not embarrassed in the least. They knew that materialism ruled, and as one of the spokesmen for this freedom movement once said, "I am empowered to do whatever I have the power to do."

Well might we marvel at the fact that, one day, several rays of light, having arrived in Canada, liked that beautiful country and decided to stay a while. They had found a charming, very comfortable, and not at all unreasonably priced villa on Mont-Tremblant, ninety miles from Montreal. The villa was in a sheltered location in a mountainous region and had ten rooms, a large well-tended garden, swimming pool, tennis court, post office nearby. There was no risk of hay fever. The present owner guaranteed absolute tranquillity and the chance to rest and recuperate—exactly what they, the rays, these tired interplanetary travelers, were looking for. They wandered around in front of the villa for a long time, took a peek in at all the rooms, and seemed quite satisfied. We do not know what ever came of this interesting venture.

In any case, what the owls and roosters and other advisers and co-conspirators were pushing the rays of light to do in the present situation—return to the sun—did not take place. The path between sun and earth is simply a one-way street, a fact which, from the perspective of humanity's interests, can only be

welcomed. Otherwise, precipitate actions at that time might have led to utterly unforeseeable consequences. If even a few rays of light had returned to the sun and proclaimed materialism, this would have led in the blink of an eye to collisions between celestial bodies, each going its own way at will. One would have to reckon, too, with oscillations of the earth, which would have had unfortunate effects on any individuals suffering from vertigo. Then, too, the more frequent onsets of darkness would lead to longer-lasting nightlife and increased alcoholism. None of this came to pass. There were amazing phenomena of light, but all of a cheerful kind: plays of colors at midday, a kind of northern lights at night. Everyone was taken aback, but they all felt that light, too, was taking part in materialism, in its way. Strange gleams and glitterings appeared without warning. Life on earth began to be especially lively and full of variety. The rigorous law, once one fell in with it, began to show its friendly face.

It felt like being under a constant rainbow. The telescopes worked ecstatically; a feverish commotion came over the astronomers whose calculations were no longer correct. They couldn't find their mistake. The most obvious answer (at least at that point)—that the rays too had liberated themselves and were now independent, partaking of the general freedom—occurred to no one.

One astronomer asked another to double-check his calculations and look through his telescope—maybe there was something wrong with his eyes? The gentlemen shuddered and did not dare to admit it: Something had happened to the laws of computation, some hobgoblin had crept in and discombobulated everything.

We all know the story of the stick someone puts in water. It is straight, it stays straight . . . but it looks broken. The injustice thereby done to the stick had never before been noticed. It hadn't escaped the stick itself, of course. The contradiction between reality and appearance tormented it. Something had befallen it that could not but be mortifying. For while false appearances in the world usually served to make creatures look more elegant and attractive than they really were, this one spoiled its appearance. Every time someone stuck it in water (and it immediately looked broken), it waited anxiously to be taken back out, to assure itself that it wasn't actually broken. Numerous sticks had developed hydrophobia. They hated the underhanded water and avoided it whenever they could.

That all changed. The change was long overdue. The stick no longer let itself be broken. When someone put it in the water it went straight in. It defied the laws of refraction. It bent not a millimeter, not a hairbreadth. No matter what angle you looked into the water from, you could see that the stick was straight.

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Oh, the things that happened in that time. What did not come about was the ideal that many were aspiring to, that some birds and elements dreamed of: solidarity arising in Nature, everyone banding together to form a united front and embark on a common campaign together. Despite brilliant isolated individual achievements in the transmission and dissemination of information, the systems of communication were too underdeveloped for that to happen. It also, more fundamentally, did not fit the principle now in force, that of radical independence. Every blade of grass wanted to stand on its own two feet. What chaos then, what intoxicating freedom, and, alas, how many tragedies. In the spring, in Paris, in the Bois de Boulogne, you could see snails, famous for their slowness, racing up and down bushes and trees at a truly insane speed. They did it not because they were driven to but because they were not driven to—simply to do it and refute the slander that they were slow.

Now they were sailing across the most beautiful, nutritious, fattest leaves and buds but without paying any attention. Carried away by the sport of it, they were in too much of a hurry to eat. As a result, they fell into the grass by the hundreds, exhausted and starved, to the amazement of the forest management authorities, who thought it was a snail disease. It bordered on suicide.

The river crabs acted in a more harmless fashion. It had struck one of them that they had made themselves look ridiculous since time immemorial by walking backward. They would never have thought to do so themselves. It must be a hereditary defect. They corrected it at once. Out of the Seine they climbed, in massive hordes, onto bridges and piers where they were comfortable, and they paraded proudly before the deeply astonished residents of the Quai d'Orsay—a heroic act that the humans could comprehend and respect no more than they did the snails' sudden speed. Housewives and children came running from the nearby streets and simply stuffed the crabs into their baskets. The crabs waved their tails, tried to protest, explain, suddenly even wanted to go backward into the river. But now there was no going back, only straight ahead into the cooking pot.

In that time, seduced by the imposing sight of swimming fish, a number of horses jumped down from the embankments and tried to do the same thing in the water as the fish. Many of them drowned before the swim meet could be set up, still trying to explain their intentions to the fish.

The fish, in turn, inspired by the horses, wanted to go onto land and see for themselves what it was like there. Behold the thirst for knowledge. They didn't want to swim around forever just because they happened to have been born in the water and descended from forefishfathers. Onto land, out of the water, to the promised land! And the deluded fish swam right up to the fishing lines, swam like mad after the fishing boats. How they crowded around the nets, all to prove their freedom. The baffled fisherman did nothing to stop them—they signaled the fish from above to be patient, everybody would get their turn, there was more than enough room. And then, when the fishermen pulled in their nets, the fish had what they wanted: They were lying not on land, true, but on the wooden decks. Even there, life on land seemed wondrous and strange. They snapped and snapped in amazement and encouraged one another to be strong. Easier said than done though. Before very long, after flinging themselves around just a couple more times and touching the floor with their tails, they were dead.

While we're on the subject of the ocean and fish, we should mention that ships on the water had started thinking about their weight and equilibrium and felt that, the way things were going, it might be time for a change there too. Why, for example, should they always have to sail with their masts and chimneys pointing up? That looked like a law, or a police regulation.

Easy to fix. They rocked and swayed. They lay on their side as they sailed along. It made a very great impression indeed on the passengers. But they weren't trying to alarm anyone. It was all meant in good fun. The ships, with nothing bad up their masts, straightened back up as soon as they realized the passengers were scared. Admittedly, just to lay down on their other side after a little while, a capricious game that, in the end (when you figured it out), you couldn't hold against them. Until then, they had always been perfectly up-standing.

A few of the smaller steamers and sailboats, though, went further. They adopted an amorously loose lifestyle. For instance, they folded their sides (including the benches) down to the surface of the water and floated there like opened flowers. Their occupants were frightened, but they had no reason to be. The little boats closed back up and thought of something else to do.

One time, late in the evening, an older pleasure boat was steaming up the Rhine, near Koblenz. It was full and the passengers were sitting under Chinese lanterns in a merry mood. Since they were approaching the famous Lorelei cliff, the passengers, drunk on wine, began singing the beautiful old song about the Lorelei from start to finish, and when one side of the ship had stopped singing, the other side started up again from the top. Meanwhile, the ship steamed along as usual. But when it was repeated yet again that "a wild ache overcomes the boatman aboard his small skiff" when he sees the Lorelei and hears her wonderful song, the ship seriously believed that the people meant it, and it didn't know what it should do, and it was scared, since they did keep singing in the last verse that "the waves, in the end, swallowed up both the boatman and his boat." The faithful ship definitely wanted to avoid that at all costs. So it sped up as they approached the cliff. The singing onboard got out of hand; the ship, aghast, raced even faster. It sped past the cliff and then could no longer stop: It was beyond its strength, it had to go up on land to recover, and it crept a few feet up the neighboring mountain. Cursing, the ungrateful people pulled the ship back into the water with ropes. It didn't understand what had happened. But it was in full agreement that they not use it for such river rides again.

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That was humane. Yes, if human beings had only paid attention, they could have learned many new and unexpected things about the true nature of Nature, which they considered blind, dumb, wild, and ferocious, lock, stock, and barrel—the spitting image of dunderheads, libertines, and tyrants.

In the United States of America, on the East Coast, there were tornados and hurricanes. But now, free and able to move however it wanted, a tornado in Pennsylvania turned out to be sad about the damage it had recently caused and wanted to make up for it. So when its time came again, it controlled itself and used all its power to pick up a group of schoolchildren waiting for the morning school bus, carry them high over the buildings and fields—slowly, so as not to scare them and to let them enjoy the view—and eventually put them down right in front of the door to their school. It did this several times, until its time was up. The much-maligned tornado heard with pleasure, with a sense of gratification, how the children praised it and were upset when it didn't come back.

And if this already borders on the miraculous (but it was only Nature revealing itself, nothing more), how much more so did the behavior of the thunderstorm in central Germany above the city of Bayreuth, in the summer, during yet another extremely well-attended production of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs*, universally hated by all of Nature. This is a long-winded musical drama, of a nature entirely in accord with human style. The performance was over, the people poured out of the festival hall. By that time, to receive them and to protest, mighty storm clouds had gathered above the city. Rain poured down,

lightning flashed. But instead of crashing like usual, the thunder issued forth in a mighty song, and look, it was singing (what a blessing after all the crimes and desolations of the opera) the aria from Mozart's *Magic Flute*, "Within these sacred halls, revenge has no place," a booming bass voice resounding with the power of an organ and making a deep (if unfortunately only temporary) impression on the crowd below.

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Nature, no longer sure of things, confused, was all aflutter. No one cared anymore about what the new revelations—the theory of atoms, electrons, and feelings and thoughts constituting nothing but a superstructure above them—actually stated. They just clung to one idea: that everything was meaningless, purposeless, pointless, and futile, there was no reason in the world, everything just lived its life. The bees were humming around their hive, inspecting what they had created—the honeycomb construction that many animals and even human beings marveled at as nothing short of miraculous — but the bees hung their thick little heads, their hearts were filled with confusion. What had they done, really? What were they? A queen lived in their hive and laid eggs, hundreds of them were drones who served the queen as prince consorts and fertilized the eggs, and there were thousands of workers who built the wax cells, gathered food, and cared for the young. How intelligently it was all arranged, how cleverly, but it was a devilish cleverness. Yes, the whole thing was nothing but a machine in which they were all cogs, without knowing it or wanting it. Everything was so geared to the machinery that they themselves had been born as parts, with, e.g., strong hairs on their back legs for stripping off and transporting the flowers' pollen. Grim with wrath, the bees, once so joyous, so fully immersed in the tasks of preparing their honey and raising their children, inspected their handiwork and hummed: "Hexagonal cells, one precisely hexagonal cell after the other—what's the point of this math? Why go on? Enough, let us build other kinds of cells, according to our own taste—rectangles, cubes, octagons, spheres, ovals, whatever we feel like."

They spoke the way people had when building the Tower of Babel, and they went right to work. And the fat bee queen on her giant bed gazed sadly at her swollen body: "It would have been so nice, but it wasn't meant to be. I was just about to lay another five hundred eggs. But now it's no fun, for me or for the poor little ones I would be sending into such a world."

And she sent off the ladies-in-waiting who had wanted to feed her, and proclaimed that as soon as she felt better she wanted to retreat into private life. Her idea was to have a mobile single cell built for her, with bees in front and bees behind. She would sit inside and be chauffeured around and finally see something of the world. Aside from that, she practiced birth control.

In fact, with the help of a group of unemployed drones as up for adventure as she was, she succeeded in constructing an unusual contraption that could not really be called a cell anymore, even if it was built from the same materials as a cell: wood chewed thin as papier-mâché and wax. It had, as was fitting for the stature of a queen, a comfortable, elongated shape, with windows cut into the front and both sides for the head and the arms, so that she could observe, wave, and command. She had this vehicle—for that is what it was—carried by two dozen extra-strong worker bees, and hitched up fifty of the bravest drones, the knights and cavaliers, as a cavalcade and honor guard. Besides that, she was surrounded by an ever-changing swarm of curious bees, her former subjects. And so she set off to find adventure, in the forest and on the heath. Her knights had reconfigured their sting apparatuses in such a way that they could be shot like darts or lances. And with the help of these freelancers, the queen (known as the Queen of Spades for her sharply pointed sting) followed the calling of a robber baron, terrifying the larger and smaller animal world throughout the area with the cunning and rapidity of her conquests. The area in question was the Lüneburg Heath in northern Germany.

The Queen of Spades at last fell into a trap she had laid for a herd of wethers. She had planned to take revenge on a shepherd, through his herd, for a number of her knights he had killed. The terrorism that the queen and her band were unleashing no longer stopped short of human beings.

"Humans," the queen cried, "have stolen the honey from our un-suspecting bee-peoples for thousands of years. We demand it back! Let us sting the humans until they return it, plague them, leave them no peace, until they sweat honey!"—a war cry that the flying and buzzing throngs far and wide furiously echoed.

Wasps and flies signed on as native auxiliary troops. Localities in the Lüneburg Heath and beyond were raided by the bands, harassed to such an extent that the farmers fled their homes and farms— which the triumphant bees and their auxiliaries then occupied and settled into. Laughing, Buzz-buzz-zuria the bee queen, who had slimmed down by then, had the deeds she had wreaked upon the animal and human world inscribed in yellow honey-script on wax tablets. The tablets were affixed to the trees, low enough for everyone to be able to read them, and whoever passed or flew by had to stop and salute the tablets,

upon pain of being shot by the bee-police on patrol everywhere.

Now when the shepherd, Wendelin, took no notice of the great events and simply continued to pasture his flock and defend himself against the rampaging bee-menace as best he could (going around armored in leather and gauze day and night), Buzz-zuria ordered a concerted attack on his wethers—their noses, eyes, and mouths. The battle raged, pricking and stinging. The sheep stampeded whatever they could. After two terrible days of battle, Wendelin resorted to a cunning ruse of war. He challenged the queen to a duel! He asked to face her, without armor, on the field of battle.

He put on a show of saluting several of the wax tablets proclaiming the earlier bee victories, whereupon Buzz-zuria, in a gracious mood and taken in, accepted. She went so far as to plan in advance the gravesite for Wendelin, the first human to be eliminated by her people.

The duel took place the following evening, on a lovely, warm July day, at the fairgrounds. The sheep, to the extent that their eyes and noses were not too swollen, formed a ring of spectators (while the others rested at a distance, ready to move out).

Wendelin, himself stung only on the hands up until that point, awaited his opponent in the ring. The friendly, pitiful mää-mää cries from his sheep encouraged and comforted him, but he was certain of his defeat. For above the ring an army with overwhelming numerical superiority was whirring and flocking —whole clouds of bees, wasps, and flies. Their humming, buzzing, and zipping frightened him, nor had he failed to notice the special preparations the bees had made: He had heard several groups of bees singing funeral marches and the one they were planning to bury, he suspected, was him. But he had made his preparations too. He had bribed a hornet, and the moment Queen Buzz-zuria and her mighty cavalcade burst upon him, the heroic hornet shot into the field of combat, which no one was supposed to enter.

“Out of the ring!” Buzz-zuria cried.

The hornet jeered. She hated the bees and trusted Wendelin, who for his part trusted her. At once the cavalcade, led by the queen herself, hurtled into the ring and began to hunt the mischief-making gadfly. That was precisely wise Wendelin’s plan.

Because now the hornet, after a few feints, flew into the wide-open mouth of the bellwether, another accomplice in Wendelin’s plot. This wide-open mouth had been lined with fresh grass by the wise shepherd, who had foreseen the coming events. When the royal troop of knights (who already thought they had the shepherd’s burial in the bag) raced after the little bugger undaunted by death, and plunged into the animal’s green mouth, the wether captain left the allied hornet just enough time to slip out through a gap in his teeth on one side, then slammed his massive jaw shut and ground to a pulp everyone and everything that found itself there between his gums and his tongue—all the evildoers who had so cruelly afflicted the animals on the heath, and especially Buzz-zuria, the first and last warrior queen of the bees, her waxen war chariot, and the numerous honey provisions carts rattling behind it, along with the many spears and darts that the troops carried with them but could not use, there was no point: The strong grass snapped every last one.

And that was that for royal splendor, and wise Wendelin let out such a loud cry of victory that all the bees and wasps and flies looking on understood what had happened and fled. The wethers bleated a song of thanks for hours, delighting Wendelin and the many animals who had suffered under the dreadful horrors and highway robbery. The Tower of Babel built by the rebellious bees who had presumptuously abandoned the traditional hexagonal system was then easily plundered by some badgers and weasels. It is from their stories that we know the madness that went on there, how every bee drank nectar only for himself and got drunk and how no one made any more honey for general consumption, except for the small quantity Buzz-zuria demanded.

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But the revolution drew closer to mankind by the day. In those times, you would often see cafégoers in the cities sitting gloomily at their tables. They would glance at the newspapers, read for a while, then turn back to their coffees and stir them with little spoons and shake them, obviously without achieving the desired effect. What was going on? What was wrong with them? They brooded over their cups. The individual component parts of their coffees refused to combine. People poured in sugar—one spoonful, two spoonfuls, three—and the coffee stayed bitter. Why? The sugar lay down on the bottom of the cup and there it stayed, as a layer. It didn’t dissolve. It didn’t dream of dissolving. It stayed what it was, wanting no part in the old mishmash.

Something different might have been expected of the milk that found itself in the cup—namely that, as a liquid, it would mix with the coffee and form drinkable coffee. Nothing doing. It swam on top, white, cold, imperious, refusing to be annexed. Anyone who wanted to drink milk would have to drink milk as

milk. It was a curious, improbable sight. But it couldn't be argued away, and even furious shaking and strong words to the waiters didn't help. Cafégoers had to scoop up the milk with a spoon, sip the black bitter coffee (which had naturally gotten cold by then), and finally pour out or suck out the stubborn sugar on the bottom. They had to drink their coffee piece by piece. It was marketed as a "coffee fractionné," but was more a puzzle than a pleasure.

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Things were gearing up for a blockade of humankind. It got bad when the doctrine of materialism reached the cattle. It took them by storm, gaining ground effortlessly. Nor was there any initial depression here—they moved quickly to deeds.

The bulls had already known for a long time, and passed down to their children, that not much came of thinking. Unlike the tiger and the elephants, they saw the light instantly and without requiring further proof. Materialism fit them like a glove. And what did they do to profess their faith in it? Let us hear.

They scoffed at heat. They lay as happy as you please in the cooking pot, in boiling water, as though taking a hot bath, and stayed raw. Suddenly the meat turned hard as a rock and had to be thrown out.

People took a new piece of meat. The same act: splashing in the warm bath, tough, then rock-hard. If it had been considerate (and still out to do something extravagant), it could have let itself liquefy, then people could have enjoyed the beef as soup, bouillon, extract. Instead it stayed hard and inedible. Let humans see what matter is.

The action spread to sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, geese, and ducks, who since time immemorial had formed a brotherhood for the nourishment of humans. They fulfilled this difficult calling by sacrificing their own lives. They gave their utmost for humankind (the ox right down to the oxtail, as we know)—the same humankind to whom they now owed the new theories. (It was a bitter blow for humanity, to have their own teachings now turned against them.)

Pigs, sheep, chickens, ducks, etc. suddenly had something better to do than feed people.

The housewives stormed the markets. They overran the butchers. Everyone said they had "gotten the bad piece." But for everybody to have gotten the bad piece was, of course, impossible. Someone must have gotten the good piece, but who? There was no one who had, not even the butchers' wives. A single, piercing cry of protest rang out.

It reached the ears of the old cattle-pig-etc. brotherhood and was met with satisfaction and pride. Not a single brother had deserted. The animals, like the beef, had stayed firm.

Panic seized the butchers. Housewives formed combat battalions and attacked and massacred the innocent butchers, or forced them into their freezers. The butchers who survived or could save themselves ran out to the country, to the ranchers and stockbreeders, to take revenge on them. Met by manure pitchforks, they had no choice but to calm down and listen to what the ranchers had to say. The ranchers showed them their own broken teeth. The cattle were acting out against them too.

At that point, battles broke out in the cities for meat grinders and milling machines that could mince the meat. The army sent in military engineers to blow up the meat in the cattle yards with dynamite. That did break it into small enough pieces but gave it a nasty dynamite flavor. There were fights over artificial dentures, and dentists worked in day and night shifts since everyone needed a new set of teeth every week. Dining rooms had to be furnished differently: Every place setting now included an anvil, and instead of a knife and fork, a hammer and saw to carve up the meat (electric in the better households).

Some said you had to not give the cows, etc. a chance to make their flesh hard. You had to take them by surprise and rip out some flesh alive. And so some courageous individuals could be found sneaking into the stalls in the dark and biting into the cows. There are quite some stories to tell about the heroic battles that ensued. But let us continue.

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In Argentina, on the famously verdant pampas where large herds of cattle roam, people tried an amicable approach. Pueblo was the name of a kind old herdsman with a gigantic straw hat the size of a hut on his head. He was of Indian blood, and Arbel was a bull he had loved since childhood. The recent tension between man and cattle depressed the old man, and he was pleased when, one day around noon, as he was relaxing on the grass after his (obviously vegetarian) lunch, Arbel the bull came up to him and mooed and looked deep into his eyes.

"Pueblo," the bull said.

"What is it, Arbel?"

"Do you like me, Pueblo?"

The bull seemed to be expecting a compliment. The herdsman glanced at his frugal orange peel, the remains of his lunch, and said, “Not much, to be honest, Arbel. We’ve had such problems with all of you.”

“Hm, I see,” Arbel smirked, acting as though he knew nothing about it.

Pueblo: “Your meat is inedible.”

“Oh,” Arbel said, “impossible. What do you mean?”

The good fellow was pretending to be hard of hearing.

Pueblo: “None of you get tender when you’re cooked. You break our teeth!”

“Oh,” the bull mooed conceitedly, “I’m sorry to hear that. How long are you cooking it? Beef needs to be handled differently than lamb, you know.”

“We know that,” harrumphed the old herdsman in his hat hut. “You’ve all been kicking up such a fuss lately. You’re acting bull-headed. Really. If it goes on like this we’ll just get rid of you. We’ll go vegetarian.”

(Pueblo concealed the fact that astounding things were afoot among the vegetables too—the carrots, asparagus, cabbages, also the green beans. Humans were facing a total foodstuff blockade, so to speak; they had really let themselves in for it with their theory.)

The bull was stunned and held his breath. “Proletarian? Rastafarian?”

Pueblo: “Vegetarian, I said. Herbivore. Plant-eater. And we’ll get rid of you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The slaughterhouse. Cut our losses.”

“And you won’t give us any more feed either?”

“Slaughterhouse,” Pueblo repeated, who loved the bull very much but saw no other way out.

After this conversation Arbel spent a bad night. In the morning, after his life partner, Hortense, an experienced cow, had been milked (lately, to make her job easier, she had been giving very watery, diluted milk, to which she also added peppermint flavoring), Arbel went up to her in the stall and told her what he had heard from Pueblo. He mooed familiarly: “We can’t go on like this, Hortense, my love. The humans want to turn Rastafarian. They’ll slaughter us.”

“Let them turn Rastafarian. And they slaughter us anyway. If that’s all they’ve got. . . .”

Arbel: “You smell like peppermint, Hortense, my little doodle-bug, buttercup, honeybunch, babycakes. You’re brushing and flossing too much. It’ll get into your milk. Who’d want to drink that.”

“Don’t meddle in my grooming, Arbel,” she mooed back. “I love peppermint. It’s good for your breath and for the teeth.”

“But what about the children, the suckling babies?” cried the tenderhearted bull. Hortense waved her tail contemptuously and drove away some flies. So Arbel hung his head and sadly reported the failure of his efforts back to Pueblo. The herdsman had expected as much: Hortense had already produced pure buttermilk the week before, and a few days ago, milk with herring flavor. She didn’t care. How she came up with herring was a mystery, but Hortense was capricious, coquettish, and knew how to talk people into anything.

“They won’t give up their freedom,” Pueblo reported back to his boss, the cattle rancher. “Times have changed. It looks bad for us. They’ll starve us.”

The boss laughed at him and called him a fool. They put engineers and inventors to work in the recalcitrant cattle battle, building machines that could reduce meat to dust. Adding water turned it into a gluey paste. It could be swallowed dry, but then people couldn’t open their mouths once more and had to be drilled open.

The housewives revolted again: They rushed to the engineers’ laboratories, bringing the new powder with them, scattered it in front of the laboratories’ doors and in the windows, then poured water on it. The gentlemen were trapped, hoist with their lack of a petard, and had to save themselves via the chimneys. The whole campaign had achieved nothing, and since more and more of the vegetables were on strike too, the situation grew quite alarming.

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And it was now impossible to go to war.

This was an emergency the likes of which humankind had not faced for thousands of years. What caused this new plague? It was the gunpowder and bullets. The powder, wherever it was and however it was encased, attracted water—greedy as a drunkard. No one could understand what had made the powder so thirsty. But so it was, and the powder’s resourcefulness at getting hold of water was truly fantastic. Presumably it drew water from the air, finding hydrogen and oxygen there and making it drinkable.

The bullets, in turn, so necessary for the well-run waging of war—well, it's hard to believe how these harmless little round things were behaving, and the excesses their longing for freedom drove them to. The bullets, manufactured by human beings and born from their thoughts, understood at once their purpose and the intent to which they owed their existence. They liked this existence of theirs, but the purpose struck them as ludicrous. These human beings wanted to kill one another. That was quite plainly crazy. Humans had to be protected against themselves. Set straight. Here we have the first attempt of Nature, grown conscious, to surpass and improve humanity. On the occasion of a war that happened to be taking place at the time, the bullets traveled as usual for a while and then stopped, as though bored, which in fact they were, and fell to the ground. They were bored because they knew in advance exactly what would happen, where they would fly to and how fast, and everything in them balked at it. Many bullets eagerly awaited the chance to leave their barrel just so that they could show humankind what a bullet was made of. The powder, constantly damp otherwise, formed an alliance with them and did the bullets the favor of exploding by request every now and then. The heavy shells of the mortars, howitzers, and coastal artillery competed with the little shotgun bullets. Tired, or seemingly tired, they all fell to earth or into the ocean after a few seconds. Some soon started to try to fly back into their gun barrels. They only sometimes succeeded, since the gunmen immediately lowered their rifles, or the barrels kicked up. But it was easy with the heavy artillery.

Just picture the amazement of the brave artillerymen in a raging battle who have loaded their weapon's heavy payload and fired— they turn around to get a new projectile—the cannon shudders, they turn back around, and they find the ammunition back in its chamber. There it sits, calm and peaceful in its bed, saying nothing. (Of course it says nothing. It wanted to give human beings something to think about, and it has.) They are stunned, they toss the old projectile aside, put a new one in, load, pull, press the detonator, cover their ears, but keep their eyes facing suspiciously forward. Amid the hellish din they see the new shell rise like Satan out of the flames, the barrel; take to the air; roar off. They can breathe easier—it worked this time, there was no mistake in the loading or flaw in the manufacturing. Then there's a hum in the distance, something comes closer, the noise gets louder, and look, inconceivable, unbelievable, but they have no choice but to believe it because they can see it, the heavy, black, elongated projectile they've just fired coming back. What in the world can be bringing it back? It hums a contented, soothing hum. It takes its time, it seems like a different projectile (in terms of mood) from the one they just shot. It falls from the sky before the astonished eyes of the human beings, the valiant artillery-men, who run head over heels away from their projectile (unjustly —it's not trying to do anything to them, after all, except enlighten and instruct). It lowers itself down with great precision into the still-glowing hot barrel and slips into its old place. Anyway, it's back home.

Few among us can clearly picture what a horrifying, bewildering effect this protest had. Generals, colonels, majors, captains, lieutenants, sergeants, general staffs, and governments in every country held their heads in their hands. The ground was slipping away beneath their feet; bullets were no longer following orders. What was the threat of earlier revolutionaries, who sang "Working man, arise! / Your power recognize! / The wheels will all stand still / If that's your strong arm's will," compared to this. And one mustn't think that this terrible development was happening only on one side. It happened on both. The enemy generals felt obliged to make overtures to each other (already a first success in the bullet's peace-loving action, or nonaction). They wanted to reach a common accord and cordially exchanged information, naturally behind the public's back. But there was nothing more they could do. It was like an epidemic. The majority of the bullets turned back to their starting point, folded as it were their arms, and hit the sack. It was the end of the world.

The generals staged processions and went to pray. They usually did that only after victories. They pleaded for the reinstitution of the laws of nature. In every country, the soldiers—the presumptive victims of these laws—were ordered to do the same.

There was widespread discussion then of the strange conversations that an old Argentinean herdsman named Pueblo had had with a bull named Arbel. Pueblo, in the presence of Arbel and Hortense the cow (by that point producing milk flavored like gasoline), was arrested.

Pueblo stood by his earlier statements. So, the military realized, the whole situation was a result of the well-known theory of materialism, pernicious to an extent no one had had anywhere near an idea of. It had lured Nature into unbridled acts of freedom and brought humanity to the brink of the abyss. They were already face-to-face with the prospect of a lasting peace.

In every country, in every capital, people now streamed to the city halls, the ministries. The mathematicians came running with their calculations that no longer added up. A battle raged between astronomers and opticians over their lenses. Behind them appeared the cafégoers, no longer willing to drink their miserable coffees, and the café owners, who could no longer find any takers for that same

miserable coffee and could no longer pay their taxes as a result. The herdsmen came too, the cattle ranchers, the butchers, the farmers, with cries and lamentations: “This theory is a catastrophe, it will bring us to ruin. We have to ban it among the livestock and vegetables.”

“The cannons and guns too. There first,” the generals demanded. “But how, gentlemen, how?”

It truly was a desperate situation. Would humanity be able to stand the chaos for long? Evildoers were already taking advantage of the general confusion and spreading rumors that it was time to give up, that all of Darwinism was refuted and we had to go back to being animals. Why cling to this civilization? What’s the good of it? Now that Nature itself has acquired our civilization and everything is topsy-turvy, we can see what it’s good for.

“What should we do?” people asked. The villains, who included many swimming coaches, gym teachers, and fitness trainers, answered, “Go back into the water and swim like the fishes. Go into the fields and graze like the cows. Climb trees.”

Whereupon various ingenious persons planted trees and started teaching others how to climb them.

They brought ladders for the elderly.

The generals didn’t see how that would solve anything. In their way of thinking, a situation could be considered resolved only after a number of persons had been arrested, locked up, and shot. But whom to lock up and shoot? The generals answered, “If you round up enough people, you can be sure that the right ones are among them.”

So they locked up every person, educated or uneducated, who had professed or promoted materialism and charged them with conspiracy to starve the state as well as misuse of artillery and firearm ammunition for illegal purposes.

During the trial, crazy things were reported from the various battlefields, now emptied out and condemned to inactivity. Entrepreneurs built stages nearby, the public who could afford admission crowded in to gape at the fronts, soldiers requested time off in the middle of battles. In Bosnia, cannonballs flew so slowly past everyone, so invitingly slowly, that birds perched on board and let the cannonballs carry them, and on the return trip they only jumped off right before the cannons’ mouths. Now that certainly looked like mockery of humans on the animals’ part. In Spain and Italy, flocks of doves rested on these peaceful commuter cannonballs, including doves with olive branches in their beaks. It was a real slap in the face for the generals. In the cities, they soon had to release the scientists and philosophers, because the prisoners could prove that, yes, they had taught and promoted the criminalized theory, but they had had nothing to do with its dissemination through Nature. Rather, they explained, the guilty parties were to be sought among the white mice, guinea pigs, and dogs, perhaps other lab animals. The furious generals issued warrants at once for the arrest of these chatty and treasonous beasts, guilty of such a serious breach of confidence. They wanted to make short work of the trials. And that was the turning point.

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The news spread to Nature, through various messenger animals, quicker than the humans would have thought possible. Everyone there knew lightning-fast that the humans had changed their views with respect to atoms, etc., and that all of this was thus in no way a definite and absolute truth—in fact, it was now outlawed.

Faith in humanity was shaken. They had seen humankind as the head of Nature, but now saw that they had been seduced and betrayed.

Truthfully, though, it was not an unwelcome discovery. A thrill of euphoria ran through Nature. They were free from a nightmare.

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Before we describe how Nature’s blessed return came to pass, we would like to cast a glance at the dogs that the generals caught and locked up at the last moment. The animal world was in an uproar and on everyone’s lips were the dogs, the martyrs, languishing in their prison cells, accused of spreading false intelligence and inciting Nature against humanity, and now at risk of being shot as rebels. That too. First humanity had tricked Nature, now it was going after its own gullible victims. Volunteer battalions of fleas were sent into action at once, with the mission of infiltrating the prison and passing the message to the dogs that their liberation was being prepared. By cleverly using any available means, carried by prison wardens and even civil servants and officers, the fleas reached the prison cells and descended upon the depressed dogs licking their paws, to scratch and console them. They informed the dogs that those on the outside were thinking of them. The dogs scratched furiously and waited. They could already

tell that at least the fleas were up to scratch.

And that night came the incredible, magnificent liberation, later celebrated by many animals in song and story.

In the prison cell where the five dogs, already sentenced and facing execution, were imprisoned, all the locks melted overnight. Bolts, clasps, chains turned to butter.

The prisoners were woken up that night by a strange sound. They ran to the doors, felt around, licked: Butter was dripping from the doors, the doors moved and sprang open as soon as they touched them, some even crashed to the floor because their hinges had melted too. The bars on the doors dissolved; the bars on the windows melted too, leaving behind sizable portions of good unsalted butter. It goes without saying that numerous residents of this prison, yanked out of a deep sleep by this unexpected blessing, found themselves in seventh heaven and feasted richly upon the animal fat. They spread it on whatever bread they had left, they could grease their boots and slick their hair, and finally they left the rapidly emptied building, occupied in the end by none but the jailers.

For these wardens had to let them go: They couldn't use their sabers and revolvers either. They couldn't even tell what time it was, since the clocks on the wall and the watches in their pockets had fallen to the ground. The fillings in their teeth melted. Amazement, and the creamy sauce in their mouths, made the wardens speechless. On some of them, the glasses ran down their noses.

The five criminals accused of high treason could not have dreamed, though, that on top of everything they would be met on the outside with a full-scale fireworks display. It almost made them run back to their cells. If you wonder what kind of fireworks these were, you should know they were unintentional, but welcomed and encouraged by Nature. Nature, in its enthusiasm, had, as we have seen, put all its forces into action to free the canine messengers. They had given the rallying cry: Let every lock and key melt away. As in all revolutions, the rallying cry was quickly overtaken by events.

Wherever prisoners were sleeping on their iron cots, they unexpectedly crashed to the floor. They woke up, thought it was an earthquake, felt around, and found themselves in a lake of butter sauce with no trace of a bed. Their astonishment was indescribable. In the central kitchen, the vats melted and dumped their contents into the flames. Some of the cooks were spreading a pitiful piece of margarine on their bread when suddenly the knife lay down on the bread, spread itself out, and was ready to eat. It was a stroke of luck that the prison itself, a blocky old stone structure, had no iron parts in its construction. But the plumbing melted. Water effervesced in torrents down the corridors and poured like a river down the stairs. It rose up out of the cellar and met the water coming down from above. At the same time, flames as thick as your arm shot out of the walls— it was only the fact that the gas pipes turned to butter relatively slowly that prevented the prisoners, including the dogs, from drowning or going up in flames. By the time the fire broke out, everyone was already on the street. Flames blazed up from the ground in the neighborhood around the prison too—gigantic tongues of flame in the places where streetlamps had stood.

The masses of water swelled mightily. What a din from the fluid element, what hissing and wheezing from the fiery. Plus the tumult and cries of the people hurrying past.

Atop the powerful torrents of water the actual heroes of the day, the five dogs, swam to freedom and barked into the morning. They were met outside by packs of their compatriots who had gathered there, and who let out an enormous triumphal concert, proclaiming to the other animals the victory they had achieved.

Behind them, the prison stood in total befuddlement and sizzled, not knowing if it should merrily go up in flames or go down in the flood.

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Like the prodigal son, whose pride had tempted him out into the world and who lost everything there, who returned and ruefully threw himself into his father's arms, Nature too retreated back to its old, safe territory.

The waterfalls on the distant Blue Nile hurled their veils of water high into the air and danced beneath it on the cliff steps, African and wild. They squealed and thrashed. They smiled at the sun with a mighty rainbow. They threw gush after gush over the poor bushes they had let dry out. And the roots of the grasses softened up and drank whatever came into their bellies.

The tiger, who had been a bloodthirsty beast to absolutely everyone in the meantime—a dark rage ate away at him, grim fury at being dependent on idiotic things like atoms and electrons—the tiger cursed and swore, "I get it. The humans started this whole thing on purpose to torture us. The first one of them I see'll pay."

But actually the tiger was glad to have it all behind him, and he crept timidly back to his lair, with a

heavy, heavy conscience after all this time. He was afraid, and ashamed.

He found his dearly beloved standing outside the door with the seven rascals she had had to feed on her own the whole time her fine husband had been bumming around. That pathetic fellow groveling up to her there, that runaway scalawag who called himself a philosopher—she gave him the reception he deserved. She gave him a good hard beating in front of the cheering brats, with several breaks to catch her breath, until he was limp and sniveling. Then she had breakfast in the sunlight with the whole family, without including him. After they were done, he was allowed to set foot in the apartment. With tears in his eyes, he lay down in his old corner. His family authority was gone. He had to admit he had deserved the beating: He was no tiger, he was an ass.

Arbel and Hortense fell into each other's arms when they got the news. They put on a big bellow-concert. The roosters crowed earsplittingly too, and the owls shrieked; they were tired of their long fruitless fight with the rays of the sun. The people stood by and marveled at the mighty racket, wondering what it might mean. Hortense was done tormenting herself with methods of diluting milk. She let the milk flow how it wanted. And when Arbel's time came and they slaughtered him, he made a parting promise to give good, surprisingly good, especially tender meat. And he kept his word. It was delicious. The truth was, no one had any beef with it whatsoever.

The gunpowder lost its addiction to drink. It stayed dry. It had been so hard to draw hydrogen and oxygen from the air anyway. And the bullets were no longer interested in the laws of ballistics. When the bullets flew, they flew. It would be all right, they would get where they were going just fine. The laws didn't come from humans, obviously, who had made such fools of themselves with their talk of atoms and electrons. There was no compulsion in the laws. The bullets knew that now. They had faith. One might object that earlier, when the bullets had turned back and reentered their rifle barrels and cannon muzzles, they were being eminently reasonable and peace loving, and now they were turning warlike? They were not, they presumed to do no such thing. They denied all responsibility for what the humans did. As far as they, the bullets, were concerned, there was one and only one higher authority whose servants and tools they were, and to whom they calmly left the task of judging their behavior.

And now everything—elements, stones, plants, and animals— behaved the same way: blind and thoughtless, if you will, although perhaps also quite thoughtful, actually.

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In those wondrous days of reaction and return, a museum dedicated to the memory of the great events was founded in the tropical jungle. Chimpanzees and orangutans had set it up. The whole animal world in the vicinity took part in the opening celebrations, with guests arriving from distant lands as well.

In an abandoned termite mound with a cathedral-like dome, the central cupola hall contained a large microscope that had already rotted. Exhibited on tables in other halls were eyeglasses, opera glasses, and magnifying glasses. There were test tubes and alembics in a side room, along with syringes and hypodermic needles. A room deep underground housed the library: books of physics, chemistry, and mathematics, mixed together in animal fashion with old newspapers, novels, and detective stories.

The primates had meticulously collected, found, or stolen it all, and they presented it to visitors with ironic comments. Long and forceful speeches were given at the dedication of the institute, intended to serve as a university to instruct the coming generations. Here they would be able to study the instruments that humans had invented to gain mastery over nature. A special theoretical course would cover the materialist heresy.

The institute soon shut down. The tiger, its president, could not make himself understood and brought down death and destruction on his students as a result. Some resourceful monkeys, in collaboration with numerous zebras, set up a traveling exhibit from the instruments, and this kept its directors well fed for quite some time.

The exultant plunge of the water down from the cliffs had become an ecstatic dance. So blissful the water was. The celebration would never end. It rushed and seethed day and night. Down below it seethed and then lay still and flowed smooth as a mirror, so that the moon, who had grown quite scraggly by that point, could finally look at himself in it again and groom himself. It had been a bad time for lovers, too, from whom he had had to withdraw his company.

"Is it possible?" the happy water wondered. "After all, I am still the same H_2O and nothing else."

The parrots jeered, "H_2O, H_2O!"

"But what do I care"—the water laughed, wantonly spraying the birds—"what do I care what the Creator made me out of. As long as he made me well."

It splashed and gurgled: "Is it possible, is it possible."

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And humanity?

The milk in their cups wasted no time mixing with the coffee, the sugar spread its arms wide and dissolved with pleasure. At this everyone could read the writing on the wall, even without opening the newspaper. And they checked and discovered that everything else was back to normal: Meat could be cooked again, bullets flew so quickly and eagerly that waging war was downright delightful. Obviously the vacations on the front and the amusing show with the birds and the cannonballs were over.

And so humanity was content and had everything it desired. People quickly forgot the stupendous events, the revolution in a Nature that had come to believe in humanity. And everything in the human world remained as it was, and it was like in the time of old Democritus.

People distinguished between two kinds of reason: one, which didn't exist, called heavenly or transcendent (but there was no place for it in the world, between the various objects and theories), and one that they carried around in their heads, where it sat encapsulated in the skull and ruled, invented, calculated, dictated, and knew what it was. Oh, it was great, and sharp, human reason was.

Admittedly there were things that it couldn't do, e.g., bring about world peace or banish death from the world, and the days were filled with little annoyances, and there were diseases aplenty, and every year thousands of people starved, every one of them endowed with this excellent human reason. But people nonetheless took great pride in it. They were not yet entirely free, but tomorrow they surely would be. Tomorrow, this reason would triumph over the world— dug in behind the hard human cranium, it would powerfully emerge and fill the vacuum of meaning and understanding piece by piece.

In the meantime, people went around firmly, with gravity and force, doing whatever they managed to do however they wanted. That they had to get their own fun, enjoyment, and diversion wherever they could was the one thing that was certain, yesterday, today, tomorrow, and fixed for all eternity.

And that's how we live, how we live, how we live every day.

FIVE INCOMPREHENSIBLE STORIES

THE ERUPTION OF MT. VESUVIUS

ONE DAY, a man living in the city of Minsk in Poland, little concerned with the wider world, raised suspicions with his remarks about Italy and was thereupon arrested.

As everybody knows, volcanic eruptions have long since ceased to be attributed to events in the earth's crust. Everything is simply chalked up to arson. Now Vesuvius was active again at the time, and everyone was asking, Who started the fire?

At the home of the above-mentioned individual from Minsk, who led a quiet, withdrawn life and had expressed the opinion to neighbors that the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius was of no concern to him, in Minsk, there was found an entirely emptied matchbox as well as a large quantity of still-unburned newspaper pages. He was unable to give a satisfactory explanation of either the used matches or his plans for the bundles of newspaper.

Finally, under cross-examination, he confessed to having started the fire. Why? His interests were scientific. He was pursuing the topic of remote ignition. He had already tried several times to ignite Mt. Vesuvius or some other volcano from here in Minsk; he had never been able to do so. Only now had he learned, from the newspapers, that he had been successful.

Further investigations revealed that he had in fact been in Minsk at the time the deed was committed. He did not want to reveal how he had done it. He said people could cause too much mischief if they knew. The tsar's central authorities in Petersburg, led by Posadowsky and Stokowski, ordered the incident hushed up, for political reasons and also because Italy could otherwise claim all kinds of compensation for damages from Russia every time Mt. Vesuvius erupted again.

The man was thus released from custody. He had to pledge that his further efforts would be restricted to remote volcanoes, for instance in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. A suitable cluster of volcanoes was suggested to him.

After the fire was started, the volcano belched fire for weeks. Then it merely smoked. During this period, the man from Minsk, it was discovered, began to smoke too.

Eventually the whole affair was forgotten.

The man himself tried other things, since this one hadn't paid off. He emigrated to Smolensk, then to Poltava. Eventually he settled along the Berezina. His project, he said, was to annul famous old battles retroactively. No one knew why. He was a hermit who lived deep in a world of his own.

THE ORIGINS OF CAVIAR

Caviar is formed from gray-green boulders that have been eroded by the weather and exposed to frequent rainstorms. This occurs in the mountains. When the stone grows soft, the individual particles, happy to be able to move at last, set out on the double and swim down the torrential streams to the valley.

There a joyful village population awaits them, having prepared for the event by erecting walls and defenses against which the caviar will be dammed (not: damned). Anyone who wants to can safely skim it from there and spread it on a slice of bread. The stony taste goes away if you chew long enough.

The caviar for sale in stores is excreted from fish and cannot in any way be compared with the original caviar, described above.

THE LIBRARY

One day, a man named Karl Flieder, chimney sweep by trade, went into a library and could not shake off his amazement at the number of books inside. He was defenseless against the thought that these works, always there (unless checked out at the moment), must have, over time, exerted a powerful influence on the walls and ceilings. They must have been exerting this influence for ages by now, so that it would be possible to acquire a kind of education simply by being there, by sitting in a chair, by standing around.

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He told no one about this perfectly reasonable thought but sat in the library in his free time, on a chair, at a table, and looked around, and waited. Flieder, a journeyman who worked with two assistants, permitted himself in the interests of his education a half, later a whole, and indeed sometimes even two hours. He fell asleep on occasion too and always woke up invigorated, serious, and thoughtful.

But what these thoughts were, of which he was full—that he never got to the bottom of.

To try to figure out what they were, he occasionally walked over to some shelf or another before he left, pulled out a book, and consulted it. Sometimes he seemed to think or to have thought something similar to what he found there. But when he reached for another book, a Wild West adventure story or the like, it could have been that too. It was impossible to determine.

From this he concluded: In a library you can't bother with individual books, which after all contradict each other anyway, you need to make do with a kind of cross-total that spending time in a book-filled room automatically produces. In short, he stopped going over to any shelves and went back to simply sitting around, during which activity many things came to his mind, none of which, however, he pursued.

The chimney sweep lived in this state of suspension for many years. Everyone could see that he was a serious, deliberate man. People said that his great respect for books kept him from reading. That respect certainly existed, but he also had a different mode of learning.

MAX

Max was a little girl.

She wore a wreath of buttercups in her blond hair. Her dress was woven of glass, which her mother, to please the child, colored according to the season of the year: green in spring, red in summer, yellow in autumn, and white in winter. How she did this was her secret, but it was out of love for Max, so she could do it.

As a consequence of this clever camouflage, Max, when she stayed out while her mother was working as a washerwoman, was invisible to most people, and her mother could do her work with her mind at ease. But Max often startled people she ran across on the road, when they suddenly saw two black shoes and two little legs come skipping by with nothing above the knees. The shrieks of these individuals startled Max in turn, so that she ran away from herself and hid in her courtyard. Her mother then gave her a pair of contrast eyeglasses so that at least she could see herself when she got scared that no one was there.

Now and then her father looked after things too. He was a friendly tailor, if we might describe his activity with this term: He would snip and trim all kinds of articles out of the newspapers and sell them tailor-made to other people, as a way to keep himself and his family above water.

Max, incidentally, had a brother, whose name was also Max and whom she always followed around. Our Max's (our girl Max's) good nature can likewise be seen from the fact that no fights ever started between them when someone shouted "Max!" The fact is, neither of them paid attention to the name, and the brother named Max paid no attention in the slightest. The fact is, he was just called Max, but he wasn't one, and was not even really her brother, she just called him "Brother."

He was a giant, gargantuan hippopotamus. No idea how it could have strayed into the narrow courtyard of their house. But when he appeared and nestled up to her little daughter, the mother, who did everything for her Max, took him in.

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Now the time had come for the great harvest festival, which was celebrated in all the courtyards and backyards along the street. People customarily gathered in the largest courtyard that evening, but this year it was decided that they should gather in the smallest courtyard, out of respect for the mother, whose it was. There was room for no more than ten or twenty people, even after the garbage cans were moved elsewhere. Yet some hundred children typically took part in the harvest festival, what with the Chinese lanterns and the beautiful music with everyone singing, and then too there were the grown-ups, who wanted to dance.

All these people, close to two hundred, now marched through the dark streets with a jolly man named Uncle Pete in the lead and a band consisting of a hurdy-gurdy, four drums plus a kettledrum, and a trumpet.

But all were quiet. They knew a surprise was planned for them in the yard.

In preparation for the festival, Max's mother had not fed Max's brother for a week. The hippo was thus looking forward to the festival as much as everyone else. As was his sister in her little glass dress.

The merry crowd approached. Uncle Pete entered the courtyard, Max's mother did the honors, the hurdy-gurdy played, the kettledrum went boom boom, the other drums rolled, the trumpet blew what it could blow. And just then, the residents of the rear building dumped big buckets of water out their window, which they had prepared on Max's mother's instructions. Whereupon Uncle Pete and his band dispersed.

The first group of children, twenty in number, came into the courtyard singing, their lanterns lit. One pour and they disappeared.

The next twenty came in and were received in the same fashion. Then the next, and the next after that. The residents had to work feverishly, but it all went smoothly.

During this harvest festival, Max's mother stood in the doorway of her comfortably furnished ground-floor apartment under an umbrella, to her right little Max, to her left the hungry hippopotamus, and they all enjoyed the successful celebration. When, at the end, the twenty adults appeared, the hippo bade farewell to his sister and her mother and swallowed the front ten.

The ten in back turned to the mother and complained that now they couldn't carry out the performance they had planned because the ten in front had been their ladies choir. The mother said there was nothing she could do about it, talk to the hippopotamus. Max, the hippopotamus, asked what they had been planning to sing.

The people in his belly answered, "The Serenade by Schubert, text by Shakespeare, LP #4008."

At that, he respectfully let them out. The choir was complete and they could start their performance.

During which, in compensation, the big Max ate a week's supply of oats, because the mother, who knew a little etymology, was raising the *hippo-potamus* or *river-horse* as a real horse.

WHAT PEOPLE MEAN BY COW'S CHEESE

To gain clarity on this matter, renowned intellectual Gregor Gregorovich opened one of his books and read:

> In the spring of 480 Before Christ, Xerxes the King of Persia set out to subjugate the Greeks. He threw a bridge across the Hellespont and crossed it with a mighty army, more than two million people, including women and noncombatants. At the same time, a Persian fleet consisting of 1,200 ships dropped anchor along the Thracian coast. The Persians and Greeks clashed in several battles: at Salamis, Thermopylae, Plataea, and Mycale. The Persians were utterly annihilated.

All due respect for the deeds of the Greeks notwithstanding, Gregor Gregorovich did not see how this would be of any help to him in the question of cow's cheese and therefore regretfully closed the book.